最弱無敗の神装機竜

バハムート・イレブン

12

Junction of STARS

あざの耕平

Kouhei Azano

ファンタジア文庫

待っていたのだ、この時を。
そのために、耐えてきた。
ほとんど枯渇していたはずの呪力が、
どこからか渾々と湧き出してくる。

いま、自分たちは無敵だ。
そんな風に、無邪気に信じてしまえそうなほど。

東京レイヴンズ 12

Junction of STARs

秋乃が息を呑んで見守る前で、
少年はそっと首を捻り、夏目の顔をのぞき込んだ。
「……ごめん。また、待たせちまったな、夏目」

東京レイヴンズ
TOKYO☆RAVENS

Chapter 1 - Omens of the Banquet

The twinkling of the stars, and the shining of crossing comets.

They approached, moved away, became alone, and gathered together.

He felt like unraveling all of this would be impossible.

Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi quietly muttered "Unraveling all of this is impossible".

That was why he thought he should pray.

Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi murmured: "That's why I'll pray."

As for how that went.....

★

The cold February night felt as if pieces of ice were floating in the air.

The cold wind that blew across the roof of the building fluttered people's hair and chilled their bodies. But Hishamaru materialized and allowed the cold wind to batter her body as it pleased. Her unstable existence alleviated the brunt of the cold wind.

This old building in Tokyo's Ikebukuro district was in an alley two blocks away from the bustling streets near the station. There were similarly-old, quiet buildings nearby, as if the area were from twenty or thirty years ago.

This eight-story building was rented out to various people on a monthly basis, with the exception of the Chinese restaurant on the first floor, the seventh floor that was being used as a warehouse for a medicine shop, and the topmost eighth floor which outsiders were told was 'empty'. But the room on the eighth floor wasn't registered on any real estate listing. It was a small blank space in the noisy, fast-moving city.

Also, that blank space was the den of a certain oni who had hung around Tokyo's darkness for a long time.

The night wind blew Hishamaru's hair. Of course she was stealthed, and anyone who saw her would have to be killed. This stern young woman wearing an old military outfit was a blue-eyed beauty. But even an imitation of her gorgeous contours would lack the charm of the original. This beautiful enchantress's figure seemed like an illusion in this old building and the backdrop of the lonesome night. Soon afterwards, the enchanting 'fox spirit' slightly moved her ears and looked down indifferently.

Her master was carrying out a magical ceremony on the eighth floor. As ordered, Hishamaru was dispersing the local waves of magical energy to camouflage the ceremony.

Though her master had said 'it's very unlikely that we'll be noticed, but we should still be careful', Hishamaru hadn't spotted any attempts to conceal this. Her master was currently carrying out an extremely special magic. He had probably had her move away just in case the magic affected her. Of course, camouflaging the ceremony was just a formality.

Hishamaru had said: "Though I'm very happy for your feelings.....", but she hadn't looked happy.

Hishamaru had once served Tsuchimikado Yakou as a shikigami. She had been called one of Yakou's retainers, and her name was still famous in the magic community. Hishamaru had always been waiting after Yakou's death, and when Tsuchimikado Harutora (the master who had been mentioned previously) had been born, she had immediately rushed to his side.

But Hishamaru couldn't immediately serve Tsuchimikado Harutora, since Harutora's father, Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi, forbid her from doing so. Yasuzumi had viewed his son as Yakou and wanted him grow up in as independently as possible. Hence, he didn't permit Yakou's shikigami Hishamaru to serve Harutora. But Yasuzumi had still permitted Hishamaru to stay by his son's side. But at the same time, he had made a condition - he would need to seal Hishamaru's strength, personality, and memories until his son was able to face his fate of his own will. Hishamaru had accepted that condition and had chosen to serve at Harutora's side in the form of Kon (her form when she had been small).

That seal had been broken during the summer two years ago. But it couldn't be called a clean break. Hishamaru had forcefully broken the seal in order to save Harutora during a battle with the Divine General Kagami Reiji, and had greatly harmed her own spiritual body. She had almost broken herself apart in order to break through the binding of the seal. Though her body had recovered after that, her spiritual body was still in an extremely unstable condition. Harutora had made Hishamaru keep her distance from this magical ceremony because he was worried about her body.

No, that might not be it.

Though he had already awakened as Yakou's reincarnation, Harutora was just Harutora. It was hard for him to accept that Kon, who had been with him all the time, had suddenly transformed into Hishamaru. Kon was what Hishamaru had looked like at a young age, but it was hard for Harutora not to feel confused when she suddenly grew up.

When Hishamaru broke the seal, she had lost a part of her memories in addition to the damage to her spiritual body. It included her memories of Yakou and her memories from being sealed along with memories of being Kon. Hishamaru wasn't worried, but it was more accurate to say that she couldn't be worried. She realized the gaps in her memories when she saw the attitudes of Harutora and Kakugyouki. That was also a reason why Harutora was worried about Hishamaru.

It had been more than a year and a half since then. Time had flown.

She didn't regret her choice to break the seal. Rather, she felt like it was a kind of honor. But now she felt very depressed that she couldn't use all her strength as a shikigami. Her master was also doing what he could to restore Hishamaru's memories and strength. But right now, not only was she unable to use all her power, but she had even become the one being cared for by her master. It was so shameful. But there was also anxiety in that remorse. Hishamaru knew that her spiritual body lacked stability and that this stability was worsening every day. She had only felt it faintly at the start, but now she was certain. Also, she feared that it was an irreversible change.

It was even harder for Hishamaru to avoid aggravating her condition when she was with Harutora. The incident that had happened in the dark temple last year was a good example. Hishamaru's aura, which was continuously becoming less stable, would worsen severely every time there was a battle. But Hishamaru didn't know how many battles she could fight. Of course there was terror from facing vanishment. But she was more terrified of separating from her Master. Especially now that he was opposing the Onmyou Agency.

She was a valuable fighting force to her master, even if her spiritual power was unstable. She might disappear at an important time, and maybe her not being there would send her master to a fatal end. Hishamaru couldn't calm down when she thought of such a terrible possibility.

Hishamaru hesitantly looked down towards the magic ceremony again. Another retainer was next to Harutora as he concentrated on the ceremony - Kakugyouki. Kakugyouki had started doing more and more

now that Hishamaru's activity was limited. To Hishamaru, Kakugyouki was a rival as well as a partner with the same master. Though having him stay next to her master now that she had to move away could guarantee her master's safety, her heart was still very envious.

"Kakugyouki arranged for this place too..."

After all, Hishamaru didn't have any interpersonal connections after being sealed for more than ten years. In contrast, Kakugyouki was a legendary oni, with a history to match the Tsuchimikado family ancestors. He had been alone for a very long time. Of course Hishamaru couldn't match his intellect, experience, and societal connections.

Actually, it wasn't just their hiding place. Kakugyouki had even provided their living expenses. In the past, Hishamaru and even their master Yakou had viewed Kakugyouki as a dependable man wise to the world.

"In that case, if I were worldlier instead of being more loyal....."

To be honest, she still wasn't sure exactly how loyal Kakugyouki was to Harutora. Kakugyouki didn't have Kakugyouki's dedication; it was more like interest and concern. Because of that, he had retreated into seclusion after Yakou died instead of chasing after his master like Hishamaru. But when Harutora awoke, Kakugyouki came out of seclusion again and pledged himself as a shikigami again. In any case, Yakou and Harutora still held his interest. Also, comrades as reliable as him were rare. Kakugyouki also followed Harutora for a more important reason than avoiding the worst possibility that Hishamaru thought of. That reason was..... he was Harutora's friend, not just a powerful shikigami. Hishamaru unconsciously put on a charming smile as she thought of this.

She thought of the television broadcast last month. The ceremony held at the Onmyou Academy - the New Year's Ceremony. Hishamaru and her master had seen what had been hidden in the recording - the group of swallows dancing above the stage. It had truly been a beautiful and heartwarming scene. Kurahashi Kyouko and Momoe Tenma were the only ones still in the Onmyou Academy now. Since Kyouko had participated in the shikigami dance, it was probably Tenma who had arranged things. It was probably tough to live while being monitored.

The monitored Kyouko and Suzuka back at the Onmyou Agency knew about Tenma coming in contact with Tsuchimikado Natsume. Ato Touji, who was still in hiding, still might not know. No, judging by the situation, Natsume might had tried to come in contact with him on her own.

"Natsume-sama's back again."

"Natsume-sama's probably moving together with Yasuzumi-sama right now."

The Tsuchimikado family that was taking care of Natsume had switched between various locations for the last year and a half, evading the Onmyou Agency's search. But Natsume's contact with Tenma was evidence that the Tsuchimikado family was still alive. It was very likely that Natsume and the others had returned to Tokyo now.

"Then, my friends, reunite in the Tokyo sky next time."

Hishamaru looked up at the starry sky and quietly closed her eyes. Memories of those nostalgic faces from when she was Kon still lingered, and even now they were treasured friends. She prayed in her heart to reunite with them and laugh together. However...

"Back then, I.....".

Inadvertently, the figure of Natsume appeared in front of her eyes. The crying Natsume who reached out to tightly hug Harutora, along with Harutora who tightly hugged Natsume as he wept.....

Hishamaru closed her eyes and balled up her fists. Nostalgic thoughts that she couldn't let go of made her heart faintly ache. She furrowed her brow, sharpened her gaze, and thought of the past in order to cover up her inner anxiety.

A pretty, unobtrusive girl stood in front of the entrance to the roof. She looked like a middle-schooler, but her actual age was older. After all, she had been a member of the Onmyou Academy's thirty-sixth class, a classmate of Harutora's homeroom teacher Ohtomo Jin as well as one of the twelve Divine Generals Kogure Zenjirou. Though her looks were pretty, she gave off a cold, expressionless impression. Though her gaze was staring in one direction, it was impossible to guess what exactly she was thinking. Though Harutora and the others had said 'You'll know once you get used to it', Hishamaru still couldn't tell what she was thinking under that expressionless face. She was Saotome Suzu. She had moved together with Hishamaru and the others since the night Harutora had awakened.

"An extraordinary stealth magic as always."

"That's my specialty."

"Do you need something?"

"No, I was just taking a walk."

Saotome replied casually, walking quickly to Hishamaru's side. She didn't feel a strong spiritual power even when Saotome was this close, only a faint sensation. But why was her stealth technique so refined? Her ability to hide herself was certainly great, but there were only a handful of practitioners who could take Hishamaru by surprise. Saotome had entered the Onmyou Agency with her classmates Ohtomo and Kogure after graduating from the Onmyou Academy. She had been the foremost Yakou researcher in the past, and later on had become a member of the Imperial Household Agency's Lingering Spirit Division, the origins of the Twin-Horned Syndicate. In addition, she had been Ashiya Doman's pupil for some time, and had met Kakugyouki several times during this period. Certainly a unique history. Saotome had called herself a senpai of the Onmyou Agency since long before - starting when Hishamaru had been with Harutora as Kon - and had been unconscionable and nosy. It was certainly no lie that she was a graduate. Come to think of it, things had already become troubled at that time. Saotome had activated the Raven's Wing that Tenma had gotten his hands on during that night (the night Harutora had awakened), creating the trigger for Harutora to awaken as Yakou. Also, she had been the one to prepare beforehand for Harutora's use of the Taizan Fukun ritual to resurrect Natsume. Now, this expressionless Yakou researcher was hiding alongside her research subject, moving together with a group that the Onmyou Agency treated as a terrorist group. If Saotome were doing this solely for her Yakou research, then she could only be called a fool.

Of course, Harutora had allowed Saotome to move with them. It seemed like Harutora and Saotome had reached some kind of agreement. Though she didn't know the details of it, basically she was allowed to act freely. As Harutora's retainer, Hishamaru was confused by why she was allowed to act freely. But as expected of Doman's pupil, there was nothing worrying about how Saotome's lived in hiding.

She had tried talking with Kakugyouki about it once, but he had just said 'don't worry about it'. In the end, Harutora had allowed it, so Hishamaru didn't have any objections. Did she? Or didn't she? .....When she thought of her memories as Kon, there were a lot of things she wanted to speak of but couldn't put into words.

"Is this alright?"

"What?"

"You're not watching the ceremony of Harutora-sama, your object of research?!"

"I've already seen him countless times."

"We might be spotted today as well."

"I'll deal with that when the time comes. We can only risk it, anyways."

Saotome stooped forward slightly on the roof's small flight of stairs. Even so, she still stared straight and expressionlessly Hishamaru. Hishamaru ignored that and continued her camouflaging work. Saotome looked at Hishamaru for two minutes without so much as a blink. Hishamaru sighed, unable to endure it.

"What is it?"

"I'm just watching you."

"Please stop, you'll make me lose my focus."

"Oh no!"

"Hmm?"

"Your aura got worse again." Saotome's expression finally became serious as she flatly pointed this out.

"I know....."

"Then why don't you do something?"

Saotome suddenly moved her face over, only two centimeters away from Hishamaru's. Hishamaru quickly became restless and moved her eyes away. "I'm doing my best."

"Right now too?"

"When it's necessary."

"It's not the time for that anymore. You should do it often to stop it from getting any worse."

Saotome was carrying out a rare emotional conversation. Hishamaru felt a bit annoyed. Though she felt awkward at Saotome's earnestness, the important thing was that everything she said was true. As evidence, Saotome also asked: "Is there anything you can do now other than my proposal?", as well as:

"You're a burden for Harutora-kun, right?"

"That is true."

"You have to keep yourself in good shape in order to do your duty, right?"

"Right....."

"I'm only saying this for you and Harutora-kun, I'm not being selfish."

"That's a lie, isn't it."

Hishamaru felt extremely annoyed, but all of that was correct. The countermeasure Saotome had thought of before to combat Hishamaru's unstable spiritual body was truly effective. But she felt sorry to use it.

Going on a walk was an excuse. Her goal was to convince Hishamaru. Unlike her usual attitude, Saotome continued talking and convincing the shaken Hishamaru.

Harutora's magical ceremony was still going on. Not long afterwards, Hishamaru sighed deeply and started practicing charm magic.

At first glance, this seemed to be an abandoned room. It was the eighth floor of an inhabited building, the primary base of Harutora and the others. Walls had been torn down in half of the floor space, and a large rectangular pillar stood looking there somewhat lonesome. The walls and floors were tattered everywhere, and the materials placed in a corner of the room were covered by plastic sheeting. But this room was very clean. The improvement in her master's living environment was all due to Hishamaru's hard work. Simple beds and similar furniture had been brought into the room, and various household objects were placed close together. Most of them were disposable supplies and wilderness survival equipment. Since there were no lights installed, their illumination came from handheld flashlights. Because of that, the abandoned room felt kind of like a secret base.

Tsuchimikado Harutora sat cross-legged on the floor in the deepest part of this room. His right eye was tightly closed, and energy seeped from his left eye. He focused his mind, quietly and cautiously carrying out the magic ceremony according to the ritual. Though Hishamaru had been entrusted with the mission of camouflaging the ceremony, he had to do his best to keep people of the Onmyou Academy from noticing it.

A large wooden box was placed in front of the cross-legged Harutora, with a raven perched top of it. Looking carefully, it had three legs. The legendary bird that was called a symbol of sun in Onmyoudou - the yatagarasu. It was a shikigami that Tsuchimikado Yakou was purported to have created - the Raven's Wing. It became a jet-black coat when Harutora used it, but normally it appeared as a three-legged raven as it was now. Harutora sat facing the yatagarasu. In contrast to Harutora's closed right eye, the yatagarasu's golden eyes stared at Harutora. Of course, it was impossible to guess what the raven was thinking, but those golden eyes aroused instinctive feelings of fear.

A retainer leaned against the pillar next to the two of them.

He was a huge man close to two meters tall, wearing a jacket. His right hand was in the pocket of his pants, and he had no left hand, the sleeve of his jacket drooping down from the elbow. He wasn't a human, he was an oni, a true oni who had lived for centuries. He was Harutora's retainer, Kakugyouki.

Harutora focused his mind on performing the ten-minute spell. He opened his right eye, sighing deeply and seeming slightly depressed. Kakugyouki smiled wryly, saying: "Looks like I don't need to ask if it succeeded or not." Harutora didn't reply and shook his head listlessly. The yatagarasu flapped its wings, flying to a clothes stand near the entrance. It was the place that the yatagarasu usually stayed. Kakugyouki glanced at the seated Harutora as if to say that the failure wasn't his fault. Then he turned his head in a different direction, saying with a sarcastic tone: "I already told you a dozen times. If it doesn't even react with this, then it's already disappeared or been sealed."

Harutora replied bitterly: "I don't know."

"As a relic of Yakou, it's most likely that the Onmyou Agency's taken it into custody. But if so, Chief Kurahashi and the rest couldn't have failed to notice the signs even if Yakou sealed it himself. There should have been some reaction. But it doesn't look like that's the case, right?"

Harutora's face fell and he nodded to Kakugyouki's words.

Harutora and the others had searched the Onmyou Agency research facilities many times. This was also one of the reasons why the Onmyou Agency treated Harutora and the rest as terrorists. According to Saotome, who had been a member of the researchers, they hadn't had what Harutora was looking for in custody. Of course, Saotome couldn't have known details about every tool that was sealed in the agency building, but she had participated in the Yakou research. There was a Raven's Wing replica in the agency building that only she could see through.

"The Principal hid the Raven's Wing and prevented people from getting their hands on it. Maybe people who didn't know better used this like an ordinary magical tool. Most people don't know that it exists."

"I see, and the Souma scattered at one point as well. There are a lot of breaks in information."

"Well, it's not strange that its whereabouts became unknown after the post-war chaos."

"In that case, most of our clues have disappeared."

"That's why I keep calling out to it like this." Harutora frowned and stared at Kakugyouki.

The Kurahashi family and the Souma family had supported Tsuchimikado Yakou during the Pacific war. The Kurahashi family was a branch family of the Tsuchimikados, and had continued on with the support of political circles and strong societal connections, unlike the declining Tsuchimikado main family. On the other hand, the Souma family had been a group of practitioners since the feudal era and had mysterious connections with the old imperial army. The Souma were the ones who had gotten the higher-ups in the military to reconstruct the Onmyou Bureau and recruit Yakou as its highest authority figure. The two families had been crucial aids to Yakou's abilities.

But after the defeat in the war, the Souma family had been split into several lines. The true princess was Souma Takiko, who had created the trigger for Harutora's awakening. And speaking of other family lines, there was her shikigami Yashamaru - Dairenji Shidou.

There might also be other family lines. Among them could be family lines that had abandoned magic. After all, it had already been half a century since Japan's defeat.

"But, Harutora, supposing that it was lost after the war, it's possible that it's gone somewhere outside Tokyo. In that case, the signal itself won't even work."

"Yes, that's also a problem. Both the Kurahashi and the Souma were based in Kanto[1]. But I think that it's very unlikely that it left Tokyo. Ah, where's that Full Moon."

"Truly a tough problem."

".....Ah, what a waste of effort. I'm not thinking deeply enough about the problem."

The sharp light that radiated from Harutora's eye as he muttered hadn't disappeared since that night. It had already been more than a year and a half since then. Harutora had always been chasing after that enigma. Harutora laughed coldly and quietly, got on one knee, and looked into the distance, murmuring: "There's no time."

"Natsume's come to Tokyo. There might be action soon. No, it's possible that action has already started."

"The Onmyou Agency, huh."

"Of course, that's the center of everything. But that's not the only place. The problem is what we should do and what we should choose."

"Even so, Hishamaru's in a very dangerous state right now. There'll be problems if we do something now." The latter half of his words were spoken in a self-derogatory tone. Kakugyouki looked expressionlessly at his master.

Silence fell over the room.

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[1] A region of Japan containing Tokyo

Soon afterwards, Kakugyouki said: "No matter what, we can't ignore the Kurahashi and the Souma. But to be honest, it's even more troublesome than your situation back then. We'll have to conduct a thorough investigation."

"....."

"You can never thing of a way at the critical time."

"Yeah, I know, but right now....." Harutora's face turned apprehensive.

Kakugyouki sighed, finally moving away from the pillar. He smiled and said:

"Alright, then how about this."

"Hmm?"

"This time isn't for the nation. Just go do what you want."

"Kakugyouki....." Harutora smiled.

But Kakugyouki said very calmly:

"But, I might pull out if it's very boring."

Harutora furrowed his brow and said:

"What!? You're so cold-hearted!"

"Since I'm an oni."

Harutora smiled knowingly. Just then, someone knocked on the door and it opened. Saotome entered. Harutora turned his body, calling out "Senpai". Harutora still called Saotome 'Senpai' in this kind of situation. It wasn't that Harutora wanted to call her that, but rather it was Saotome's wish.

"Looks like it failed."

"Honestly, everyone around me is an emotionless bastard."

"Ah, that's mean. I was concerned about you."

Saotome was a bit displeased, but her expression was still the same as always. Saotome was a very useful woman for the fugitive Harutora and the rest. The Onmyou Agency didn't know that she was moving together with Harutora either. Allegedly, Saotome had also been declared missing, and the Mystical Investigators' search still continued. She was more skilled than Hishamaru and Kakugyouki at various kinds of secretive jobs. That was probably from Ashiya Doman's teachings.

"Anyways, this time was a waste of effort too."

"Yeah."

"How depressing. I want to see the Full Moon too. Harutora-kun, let me slightly ease your worries."

"Ah? What are you trying this time?"

"The convincing succeeded."

Just then, Hishamaru entered.

"Kon....."

"Yes, Harutora-sama."

It was Hishamaru who entered. But her body had shrank a lot. She had turned from a young woman into the form of an elementary-schooler. But her ears and tail were still the same.

Harutora smiled.

"What is it? It's been a long time since you dressed like that."

"E-Eh, that's embarrassing, ah, no!"

Hishamaru's ears twitched frantically as her face reddened. She didn't dare look at Harutora.

Saotome spoke in place of the stammering Hishamaru.

"Regretfully, Hishamaru-chan's spiritual instability is undoubtedly the truth. So I had her at least turn into Kon's form while we're in hiding. Right, Kon-chan?"

"Don't add the 'chan'!"

Hishamaru glared angrily at Saotome. This was the countermeasure that Saotome had thought of. Actually, Hishamaru's spiritual body was stable in Kon's form. Hishamaru was a powerful defensive shikigami. Her spiritual body was obviously composed of powerful aura that could only be disturbed by a powerful force. But the speed at which it ran out of control was also very fast. But Kon's spiritual state was mostly sealed by Yasuzumi's power, so she could keep the instability and keep her main spiritual body stable.

"This is a way to save energy."

"Not only am I useless as a retainer, I've caused Harutora-sama worry recently. I'm extremely sorry and truly ashamed for that. I truly apologize, but please allow me to continue staying by your side."

Hishamaru kneeled on the ground after speaking, deeply lowering her head.

Saotome balled up a fist when she saw this. She said:

"Harutora-kun, be a man."

"No, it would be great to be with Kon. Kon - no, it might be better to call you Hishamaru. Raise your head, you're overreacting."

"Harutora-sama, although you say that, my current form is really a bit....."

"Then we can be together again after you turn back."

"Isn't it great that I was able to succeed in convincing you so selflessly, Kon-chan?"

"Hmm? If it was selfless, then stop rubbing her tail."

Kakugyouki leaned against the pillar again. Saotome stared intently at Hishamaru's tail, and the yatagarasu hopped around on the clothes stand and crowed.

"It's great that everyone's here."

"Harutora-sama....." Hishamaru's eyes sparkled as she looked at Harutora. Kakugyouki smiled wryly and got down on one knee, the yatagarasu stopped jumping about, and Saotome quietly walked behind him.

"I remember that Kogure called forbidden magic a game with the world on the line. How insightful."

Harutora said this and bent his waist, stretching his muscles. He continued speaking:

"Kakugyouki and I spoke. Right now, I'm not being praised or thanked by anyone. Actually, it's the opposite. So....."

Harutora looked at the shikigami.

"You guys are the same. You have the right to choose, and I'll respect your choices."

Hishamaru replied to her master's announcement:

"Does that need an answer?"

Then, Kakugyouki said:

"You're overreacting too."

The yatagarasu cried out loudly, and Saotome quietly looked at their master. Harutora nodded happily at the shikigami.

★

The weather had turned cold.

But noisy activity still continued on the bustling street. The excitement of the people made the entire street feel distant from the winter. Tsuchimikado Natsume, Souma Akino, and Tsuchimikado Takahiro walked out from the southeast exit of the JR Shinjuku Station into Meiji Road of the central district of Tokyo, heading towards Yasukuni Shrine.

It was already ten at night, but the groups of people on the street showed no signs of reducing in number. The amount traffic was the same. Actually, now was the start of the night activity.

Natsume and the others were currently hiding in an old residence in Kichijoji. They were just wandering around Shinjuku to train Akino's stealth magic. Takahiro believed that although Akino's stealth magic was high-level, it was still better to accumulate actual experience. Though Akino hated training, she immediately agreed when she heard 'Shinjuku'.

Since the Onmyou Academy and Agency were in Shibuya, Natsume was already used to the bustling Shinjuku night. But Shinjuku's night gave a different impression from Shibuya's. Shinjuku didn't feel as crowded as Shibuya, but there were people no matter where they walked. People were older and there were eye-catching people wearing formal clothing. Actually, these differences in atmosphere were very important for controlling stealth magic. Capable people would be able to perfectly use stealth magic no matter where they were - it was a skill. One had to get used to the surrounding environment in addition to concealing their presence and aura. The first stage of that was grasping the surrounding atmosphere and reacting to it.

Natsume wore a jacket, a short skirt, and boots. The outerwear she always wore was the most practical. But Natsume was wearing something more exposing and eye-catching. It was just like Akino said, 'beautiful girls are pretty no matter what they wear'. Akino was wearing a sweater and a coat, with a scarf around her neck. It seemed a bit girly and cute. Incidentally, Takahiro who walked with them wore very simple clothing. Suddenly, Takahiro stopped and said:

"Hey, Akino!!"

Natsume, who was walking ahead, looked back, and at the same time, the slightly slow Akino was stopped and looking into the distance. She was standing still with her stealth magic released. In addition, a pair of rabbit ears had materialized. Her normally-concealed ears were extending from her head.

"What's up with you, you're a bit absent-minded."

"Sorry."

Natsume wryly moved closer to the dejected Akino.

"Akino, you don't need to apologize, just conceal yourself again."

"Eh..... Okay."

Akino made a seal and quietly chanted an incantation. Instantly, Akino's aura was concentrated and covered the surroundings. Though it wasn't very complete, it was at a usable level. Natsume, who guided Akino's practice every day, was also very surprised when she saw this. The ears she had seen just now were evidence that Akino was a rare rabbit living spirit. But Akino was a bit undisciplined, so she hadn't made a great deal of progress.

"We're not here to play! This area is within the range of the Spirit Sensers. They might be constantly monitoring it, and you aura is very unique, so don't get careless!"

"Yeah, I'm sorry."

Akino instantly turned depressed at Takahiro's scolding.

"It's Akino's first time out at night, so of course other things would catch her attention."

Though she was very stern when she taught Akino, Natsume still spoke up for Akino when it was someone else's turn to do so.

"No, that's not it. I didn't get distracted just now by the scenery, even though I've only seen this scenery on TV before and it's very nice....."

"Then what is it? Is the stealth making you tired?"

"Uh..... How should I say it..... Um....."

"Oh, I know, you're hungry, huh."

Just then, Akino's stomach growled. Akino's face reddened and she said:

"Hey!!! Natsume, you idiot!"

Takahiro looked at his watch to check the time, unable to stop himself from laughing.

"Okay, okay. It's a bit late, so it's time to go back, hahaha." Takahiro's expression changed greatly after he said this and he hastily looked back. Natsume noticed and also frantically looked in the same place. Akino watched the two of them blankly.

"Natsume, you noticed too, huh."

"Yeah, a spiritual disaster. It's getting faster and faster."

Meiji Road went in the direction of East Shinjuku, but it was quite a far distance away. The aura disturbance was expanding very quickly, but they could sense that it was coming in their direction. A mobile spiritual disaster had appeared.

"Ah, that's a bit bad. If we don't hurry up and escape....."

"Don't worry. This place is in the area of the Shinjuku branch, so it'll be exorcised before a situation happens."

"But we can't be careless. If a spiritual disaster happens, the Spirit Sensers in this area will focus over here."

Though spiritual disasters were happening pretty often recently, there were almost no mobile spiritual disasters.

"We should be fine, right?"

"At least there's no need to panic." Takahiro said naturally. At the same time, Akino, who was a bit unconvinced upon seeing his attitude, said:

"But it's a spiritual disaster. Didn't you just get mad and tell me not to get careless?"

Takahiro smiled wryly and patted Akino's head.

"Listen, Akino. What's important for a practitioner isn't what kind of crisis you face, it's keeping an alert attitude." He looked at Natsume and continued:

"Magic is a fighting technique, and unlike martial arts, practitioners can't do anything if they don't focus their mind. That's why you can't do anything if you're caught off-guard, no matter how much skill you have. Defensive shikigami are made for those emergency situations. Realize that as a practitioner, it's extremely important to focus your mind."

Takahiro had lots of experience as a former Mystical Investigator, and his words were also very convincing. Akino nodded diligently, and Natsume also expressed her agreement.

"If a spiritual disaster happens, the media will pour out in addition to the exorcists, and traffic will be restricted as well, so it would be wise to leave Shinjuku immediately." Takahiro proposed. Suddenly, something flew through the night sky. A bird? No, it was something like a large, remote-controlled aircraft.

"What's that???"

"A shikigami?"

"Garuda." Takahiro said, somewhat surprised. "That Shigeoka's in the Shinjuku branch too, huh."

"Someone you know?"

"Not one of my acquaintances. Don't you know him? He's an Independent Exorcist, the Colonel of the Twelve Divine Generals."

"I've only heard his name."

Shigeoka Shunsuke was a National First-Class Onmyouji and exorcist, or an Independent Exorcist. Right now there were a total of five Independent Exorcists. Since Kogure had transferred from the Exorcist Bureau to the Mystical Investigators, the Exorcist Bureau now only had four of the Independent Officers. Natsume had often heard the name 'Colonel' in the news when she came to Tokyo. He had left the frontlines after the Hinamatsuri Repurification incident two years ago, as it seemed like he had suffered from spiritual encumbrance during a spiritual disaster purification. After that, Shigeoka had worked hard to recover from his spiritual encumbrance, and had returned for good last fall just in time to replace Kogure. Since then, Shigeoka, Yuge Mari, and Kagami Reiji had carried out spiritual disaster purifications in the city underneath Miyachi Iwao.

"A Divine General? Like the three who came to Seishuku?"

"Yeah. If you remember that woman Yuge from back then, she was also an Independent Officer."

"Amazing."

"Yeah..... But she's a troublesome woman, and a more outstanding Onmyouji than the other Independent Officers."

"Hmm? Is she stronger than the Exorcist Bureau Chief?"

"Miyachi, you mean. That guy's certainly powerful, but he has too much horsepower. For example, you'd use a kitchen knife instead of an axe when you're cooking."

Takahiro was silent for a bit, then said:

"Okay, then, it's a good opportunity. Before we go back, why don't we go to the scene of the spiritual disaster purification and study a bit? It's good to understand Independent Officers a bit. After all, they're an enemy - a powerful enemy - of we who lack power."

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The general-purpose shikigami Garuda was the third kind of manmade shikigami that the Onmyou Agency research department invented. Garuda was a special kind, primarily a detection-type but also very similar to a transport-type. It was a shikigami made to Shigeoka Shunsuke's request. The Garuda was carrying dozens of shikigami charms. They were specially-manufactured defensive shikigami that Shigeoka had set, 'Modified G1 Emperors' and 'Modified G2 Yaksha'.

Shigeoka and the Garuda shared senses, and rushed to the scene carrying shikigami charms. Defensive shikigami were originally supposed to be things that were by their masters all the time to protect them. Shigeoka's Emperors and Yaksha were materialized for the spiritual disaster purification. Shigeoka first materialized the Emperors, surrounding the spiritual disaster, and suppressed the spiritual disaster's expansion. Then he materialized the Yaksha, connecting them to the Emperors to create a surrounding net and to carry out the spiritual disaster purification. The group of shikigami that developed was linked together. The shikigami created this time could be viewed as two small teams of exorcists. But if Shigeoka wanted to, it would be possible to increase their numbers and spread them out. It was a team of shikigami that only a special practitioner could use. The Garuda spiraling in the sky received instructions, and the shikigami team surrounded the spiritual disaster and commenced the purification. Also, they completed a mission that would take other people ten minutes in a mere five minutes after the Garuda arrived.

"Mission complete."

Shigeoka checked the condition of the shikigami and nodded.

If Shigeoka were to be described in one word, that word would be 'obsessive'. He was over thirty years old, and was a bit eccentric, often wearing a gloomy expression. He wore a beret with the Exorcist Department mark and wore wrinkle-free miasma protection clothing. Looking carefully, one would notice that these clothes were a bit different from normal. They felt like a military uniform. Actually, the nickname 'Colonel' came from this.

"Officer, I have a report."

"Before that....."

"Hmm?"

"Your collar is untidy."

"Ah?" His subordinate hastily fixed his collar upon hearing the criticism.

"A disruption of equipment is a disruption of the regulations. It's not just our clothing, it's our equipment. It can block miasma and stop leaks of magical energy. If you don't pay attention to it, you can't call yourself qualified."

"Yes, sir."

"Also, don't drop your guard, or it might become a vital mistake."

Shigeoka continued lecturing, and the subordinate straightened himself and kept replying with "Yes, sir", until he finally answered with a respectful "Thank you, I'll be sure to pay attention in the future."

"Then, the report."

"Yes, sir."

The subordinate immediately began his report from after had arrived on scene. Shigeoka silently listened, and afterwards said:

"Good, begin dealing with the aftermath immediately."

The subordinate bowed and began work.

Shigeoka took out a notebook from his pocket and started writing. He was writing an informational memo for the higher-ups. The subordinate who happened to be passing by next to him smiled wryly and said "This again", but of course Shigeoka didn't pay him any attention. Shigeoka was a hard-working, thorough Independent Exorcist. Most of the Twelve Divine Generals all had excellent talent since youth, and had probably become National First-Class Onmyouji at around age twenty, but Shigeoka had only done so after age thirty. The reason was very simple - Shigeoka wasn't a prodigy like they were. Of course, his spiritual power was good compared to the average person, and his control of magic was outstanding.

"Officer Shigeoka!"

Shigeoka's subordinate called out to him as he was writing. He immediately stopped and looked towards his subordinate.

"Sorry, but actually....."

"What is it now....."

"I have something to say."

The subordinate also looked very confused as he gave the report. Shigeoka stayed silent, then said:

"So the lingering miasma has already dispersed completely."

"Yes, there's no danger here right now."

"Return to your post." Shigeoka nodded and gave a brief order, walking a few paces to the side. Across the road was a white, high-class car stopped by the road. Anyone who worked in the Exorcist Bureau would know at a glance. As Shigeoka's boot-clad feet strode closer, a beautiful, grandiose woman got off the car, wearing a brilliant smile.

"Shigeoka-sama, you've done well tonight."

"It was just a spiritual disaster."

"You already purified it, huh. I wanted to see a purification scene."

"There are spiritual disasters every day. Speaking of which, no one's seen more spiritual disasters than you."

"No, I haven't seen them with my own eyes." This woman wore a smile from beginning to end as she spoke.

The woman looked young, or rather, her appearance didn't belie her age. She was actually older than her colleague Yuge, so she should be older than 25, but she looked a bit younger than Yuge.

"Then....." They suddenly entered the main topic.

"What business do you have this suddenly, Special Senser Kadei."

"Well..... Actually....."

"We came to see Morito, Shigeoka-sama. We still haven't seen Morito working."

Just then, another woman came out of the car. She wore the same smile, and her voice was similar to Kadei's, and they were almost exactly the same except for the fact that one had white eyes and one had black eyes. They were twins. The two sisters were both Divine Generals who possessed godlike senses, known as the Exorcist Bureau's treasures just like Miyoshi Tougo. They were Special Sensers Kadei Byakuran and Kadei Kurogiku. As Spirit Sensers of the Exorcist Bureau, and in particular Special Sensers who were National First-Class Onmyouji, they were treasures that the spiritual disaster purification business couldn't do without. They normally worked in the Exorcist Bureau main headquarters and rarely went outside. Shigeoka consented after hearing Kurogiku's words.

"So it's that intersection close by. Can you see the signal on the other side? It's the one over there."

"Oh, that one."

"Onee-san, which one, which one?"

"Look, that little one."

"Hmm? I can't see it clearly here, let's get a closer look."

This pair of sisters were as cute as children. They weren't faking it; this was how they normally were.

Japan's two representative clans of Onmyoudou were Abe no Seimei's Abe clan and the talented Kamo clan of his teachers Kamo no Tadayuki and Kamo no Yasunori. The former later became the Tsuchimikado, and the latter became Kadenokoujike. But the Kadenokoujike family broke apart during the Warring States period at the end of the Muromachi period. Afterwards, during the Edo period, the broken-apart Kadenokoujike family became the Kadei.

"As I thought, the two of you are worried about Morito."

"You could call it a work partner for the two of us."

"Yeah, our work got harder after Miyoshi transferred."

"But there's no helping it, since Miyoshi's a genius."

"Miyoshi's so pitiful. Mystical Investigator work..... It would be nice if he could come back to the Spirit Sensing Division."

"Yeah, Onee-san. Should we take a vacation and invite Miyoshi to come travel?"

"That's a good idea. Kurogiku, where should we go? Hot springs? Or skiing?"

"Good ideas. What about Paris? Or Hawaii?"

The sisters spoke and laughed, completely out of place in the spiritual disaster purification scene atmosphere. Shigeoka coughed dryly, but he didn't get noticed. The two of them were actually talking about the Spiritual Disaster Early Detection Net that the Onmyou Agency was working on, for which progress was already eighty percent complete.

But speaking of that, Shigeoka was greatly looking forward to the sensory net. After all, Shigeoka held the opinion that spiritual disaster purification should be systematized, so it was perfectly in line with what he thought. Of course, what Morito could do was very limited. Shigeoka looked at the sisters in the back of the car. They seemed to have completely forgotten about Morito and were happily chatting about travel plans.

Divine Generals - first-rate modern Onmyouji with outstanding ability.

In the end, Shigeoka's team withdrew from the scene and the sisters also returned to headquarters. Though it was very unfortunate that they weren't able to see a spiritual disaster purification scene, it was nice that they had been able to see Morito.

"It's nice to go out like this once in a while."

"Yeah, there are some fresh new auras."

"Yeah. There are so many people in this area, it makes me dizzy."

"That's true, but the other Onmyouji are all very calm."

"The other Onmyouji don't have as keen senses as the two of us."

"Having talent is tough too. I wonder how Miyoshi-sama has it."

"Ah, right, we finally came outside, so why don't we go to a convenience store, Onee-san?"

"Yeah, good idea."

"Okay, let's go look at some new things."

"I'm a bit nervous. There's a worker in the store who makes my heart race."

"You should be a little braver at this kind of time."

"Eh....."

"What is it, Onee-san?"

She didn't reply.

"Did you see a spiritual disaster?"

"No, but, Kurogiku, I'm a bit interested in that aura. Help me out."

"Hmm? Where?"

"Look, over there." Byakuran pointed outside the car and Kurogiku called for the driver to stop as she focused her consciousness and looked over there. She didn't notice it at first since the aura was concealed. Also, it was stealth on the level of a professional Mystical Investigator. It was just coincidence that Byakuran had noticed it. It was truly just a coincidence, as their work usually only involved spiritual disasters and they very rarely looked at human auras.

"I got it. Then, Onee-san."

The sisters linked arms and pointed in that direction.

Their auras resonated, increased, and improved their spirit-seeing abilities. They could only complement each other like this because they were twins - it was a special technique of theirs. The sisters had an even better spirit-sensing ability than Miyoshi Tougo's when they combined their power.

"Onee-san, is this aura a dragon's?"

"Yeah, and it's not a shikigami. Could it be possessing someone?"

"Now that you mention it, in some temple last year, Miyoshi....."

There seemed to be a dragon living spirit in a place not far from the scene of the purification. It was currently moving in the direction of the station. Perhaps it was riding a train. Byakuran silently continued following that aura.

Then.....

"Sorry, Kurogiku, we'll have to go to the convenience store next time."

Chapter 2 - Scenery of Old

She no longer had any options left. She didn't know how many days she had racked her brains without being able to leave this dead end. There hadn't even been two months left in the first place. Now there weren't many days left until X-day.

Tokyo Akihabara, inside the agency building of the Onmyou Agency.

Suzuka sank listlessly into the sofa in her research lab.

She curled herself up on the sofa with her white lab coat casually draped over her, glaring upsettedly at the calendar on the table. Recently, the mere occurrence of the calendar greeting her eyes had been enough to feel terrible. All she saw in it was the rude, inescapable reality.

Of course, it couldn't be said that she had nothing to do all day. She was thinking of ways to get in contact with her friends every minute of every day, even when she was sleeping. But it was all fruitless. She lacked the power to break through her circumstances and could only watch as time escaped from her.

"......Damn....."

After voicing her word of displeasure, Suzuka rose from the sofa.

She searched her mind for any possible countermeasure again. Suzuka gave up on thinking in a mere several minutes, and fell back onto the sofa sulkily.

Who knew how many times this scene had already been repeated. After all, she had never before experienced getting pushed into such a quandary.

Suzuka had obtained that information last month.

It had been the morning after Tenma had sent a message to his friends. The most aggravating part was that it was the 'enemy' himself who had confirmed Suzuka's suspicions about the plot she had noticed.

It was coming on March third, Hinamatsuri[2].

They were going to carry out another spiritual disaster terrorist attack on that day. The third 'purification', following after the Great Hinamatsuri Purification four years before and the Hinamatsuri Repurification two years ago.

And according to what they said, this time was 'for real'. That hadn't seemed like a joke at all.

"Those guys....."

The past two incidents had all been brought about by the Twin-Horned Syndicate, a group of Yakou fanatics. The culprit of the first incident was Suzuka's own father, Dairenji Shidou; the second time was his subordinate Mutobe Chihiro. The two of them had both lost their lives after the spiritual disaster terrorist attack.

But now, the two of them were again planning the third spiritual disaster terrorist attack.

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[2] A special day where dolls representing the Emperor, Empress, and attendants are laid out. Always celebrated on March 3.

Dairenji Shidou and Mutobe Chihiro had been resurrected as Souma Takiko's defensive shikigami, Yashamaru and Kumomaru. No, this had probably all been within Souma's calculations from the start. After disrupting the spirit flow of Tokyo twice in a row, the Souma were finally going to go after their goal - to realize the desire of their clan.

.....This was what Suzuka thought.

She was incomparably upset with herself for understanding everything but being unable to do anything about it.

She had risked great danger and returned to the Onmyou Agency - the enemy's den - in order to dig up information on the enemy. In that sense, being able to obtain information on the spiritual disaster terrorist attack was already an incredible accomplishment.

That being said, everything was meaningless now that she was unable to convey the information she had obtained to her friends and sound the alarm.

This was her research lab, but it was also the room she was confined to - in other words, a prison. Her connections with the outside world had been cut off in the first place, and the jail had been strengthened after they learned that Suzuka held information about the spiritual disaster terrorist attack. For example, she had seen shikigami used for surveillance outside the research lab before, but now it was Kumomaru who had left his master Takiko to personally guard her.

Kumomaru was a Yase Doji, a powerful shikigami that had even posed a threat against the dragon Hokuto that Natsume controlled. He was an enemy that Suzuka could not overcome with her magical energy restricted. Never mind defeating him, simply escaping from his monitoring was no more than a dream.

Even so, maybe there would be some opportunity to tell a different agency member about the current crisis. After all, Suzuka was currently confined inside the Onmyou Agency building, and outside the research lab were employees and Onmyouji at work. If she could get through Kumomaru and loudly expose their schemes, someone would hear her.

But no matter how seriously Suzuka shouted, there might not be anyone to believe her. After all, this was Suzuka who had violated Onmyou law and had been convicted of using forbidden magic.

She was one of the Twelve Divine Generals as well as the Onmyou Agency's figurehead girl, the 'Child Prodigy'. But although the employees in the Onmyou Agency had a straightforward impression of Suzuka, she was a prodigal troublemaker who had been left to her own devices. Even if that Suzuka accused someone of something, people might not listen sincerely.

...Most importantly.....

Behind Yashamaru and Souma was the Onmyou Agency Chief, Kurahashi Genji.

Not only was Kurahashi the current head of the famous Kurahashi family, but he was a National First-Class Onmyouji like Suzuka, the person who stood at the top of the modern magic community. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that standing against him was opposing the entire magic community.

No, ultimately Kurahashi was helping the enemy, so he was an accomplice of the enemy. In other words, this spiritual disaster terrorist incident was a 'crime of the Onmyou Agency'. Telling the culprit, the Onmyou Agency, about the danger of this situation wouldn't accomplish much.

Also, just like old man Daizen had said, was she actually able to prove their terrorism?

It was extremely difficult for ordinary people to detect crimes of magic. The national judiciary would naturally have a hard time, and the only organization that could validate a crime of magic was the Magical Crime Investigation Division of the Onmyou Agency. And Kurahashi was the Chief of the Magical Crime Investigation Division.

Also, Kurahashi was currently monopolizing both official and private power over the magic community. Resisting him by asking groups of the magic community for aid would be incredibly difficult.

...In addition, according to what Takiko said, the Souma family also held sway in political circles.

From the rumors she heard from Takiko, Satake Masumi, a member of the currently-dominant New Democratic Party, seemed to be a member of the Souma clan. In addition, he was the nephew of her father - in other words, he was actually Suzuka's cousin. Though they hadn't met, Suzuka inadvertently shivered at realizing her connection of blood to the Souma clan.

The Souma family had long since calmly slipped into the higher-ups of the military during the Pacific War era, building their power along the way. Those means were still effective in modern society.

In addition to the Souma, Chief Kurahashi was also politically connected. He hadn't directly participated in spiritual disaster purifications or Mystical Investigator work these few years, and he almost never personally directed that work. Rather, he had focused on expanding the Onmyou Agency's influence outside the Onmyou Agency. He was the most influential Onmyouji in the current political world.

How could Suzuka and her friends oppose such powerful Kurahashi and Souma families.....

".....Well, thinking about that now is no help....."

The first priority right now was stopping the third spiritual disaster terrorist attack planned for this Hinamatsuri. For this, Suzuka had to get the information she held onto outside and transmit it to people who would sincerely accept it, her friends who had been in continuous hiding.

"Well, I'm only this anxious because I can't do that. .....Damn."

She had already lived in the Onmyou Agency for over a year and a half, and she was conscious of the fact that she was talking to herself more and more. She knew she couldn't run her mouth since Kumomaru was outside, but the habits that had formed in her mind after a long time were hard to change.

...As expected, she had to break through with force.....

A conclusion she had reached many days ago.

But Kumomaru was a shikigami and didn't need to eat or sleep. He was able to constantly watch over Suzuka twenty-four hours a day, so escaping from this jail would be an incredible feat. She racked her brains trying to think of some way she could make an opportunity to escape, but she couldn't think of any strategies.

.....She had to hurry..... If she didn't hurry, then.....

Unconsciously, Suzuka's gaze fell on the calendar on the table. Suzuka's expression instantly twisted into a frown and she furrowed her brow - looking like she was about to cry.

Then.

"Excuse me."

The moment she heard this voice, Suzuka cringed and jumped up from the sofa.

After consciously pushing back her instinctive terror, she turned her head in the direction of that voice with all the strength in her body.

Standing there was a slender young man. He was dressed like an old aristocrat, wearing a white shirt and black vest along with trimmed pants and an ascot. But he gave off a cold, dark impression from underneath that dress, without any of the honesty and nobility that a true aristocrat ought to have.

He was Takiko's shikigami, Yashamaru, as well as Suzuka's father Dairenji Shidou after resurrection.

"....."

"Haha. Don't glare at me like that. I just came to check whether you've made any progress."

".....I wish you'd knock before entering."

"Ahh, sorry, sorry. After all, it's a lot of work to lock the door again."

Yashamaru smiled as he replied.

Suzuka's research lab was always magically cut off from the outside by a strong barrier. It had originally been a barrier that Suzuka set up herself, but now Yashamaru and the others had modified the spell. That was why he was able to come and go as he pleased.

"Also,"

Yashamaru continued asking with the same frank tone as always:

"How's the research?"

".....Didn't I already write a report last week? Did you not look at it?"

"Of course I looked at it, but it's important to write what you yourself feel in the report. Ah, it's hard to understand without talking directly with the author."

Every time Yashamaru took a step towards the sofa, Suzuka retreated a step to maintain the distance between the two of them. Unconcerned about his daughter's uncooperative attitude, Yashamaru bent his waist a bit to lean against the back of the sofa, leaning his upper body forward as he looked at Suzuka.

Yashamaru had given Suzuka a mission when she returned to the Onmyou Agency. The mission was regarding the research of 'soul magic'. Suzuka had originally been an Onmyou Agency researcher specialized in the 'Imperial Onmyoudou' that Tsuchimikado Yakou had established. Also, though soul-related magic was designated as forbidden now, it had existed during Yakou's time - during the time of Imperial Onmyoudou. The representative magic was the Taizan Fukun Ritual that Harutora had resurrected Natsume with.

Suzuka had also tried to resurrect her dead brother with the Taizan Fukun Ritual, and had thus investigated 'soul magic' before.

However, when she saw the trove of magic books and data that Yashamaru had sent to her from the Souma and Kurahashi, she realized that her knowledge from back then had only been the tip of the iceberg. Even the magic that had resurrected Dairenji Shidou and Mutobe Chihiro as Yashamaru and Kumomaru also came from the Taizan Fukun Ritual. Suzuka hadn't even imagined such a thing to be possible back then. The Taizan Fukun Ritual wasn't a single magic, it was a 'system of magic' to control souls that Tsuchimikado Yakou - no, that the Tsuchimikado clan had established after many years.

It seemed that Yashamaru's understanding of the Taizan Fukun Ritual was far above Suzuka's. Since he was still ordering Suzuka to research it, perhaps fully verifying the Taizan Fukun Ritual system was tough for a single person. Also, more importantly, he also had other things to do.

".....Is it really alright?"

"Hmm? What are you referring to?"

"Being away from Takiko. Isn't it Kumomaru who's responsible for guarding me, not you?"

"Ah, that. I just finished things up over there. She probably won't regain consciousness for some time."

".....Looks like the 'gift' is going very smoothly."

"Of course. She's the legitimate successor to the thousand-year-old Souma bloodline. A perfect messiah."

Yashamaru laughed unconcernedly as he said this.

She couldn't sense any hostility in that laugh, nor could she sense any animosity, but a mysterious pressure seeped from it at tried to crush Suzuka.

Takiko had been coming to the research lab to talk to Suzuka less frequently this year. Maybe it was since Suzuka had gotten her hands on information about the spiritual disaster terrorist attack, or maybe it was because of the biggest reason, which was that Takiko was 'preparing' for the next stage so seriously that she couldn't visit the research lab.

In order to achieve the Souma clan's desire.

The Souma bloodline's shaman princess would finally show her true worth.

"In any case, tell me whether you've had any progress here, Suzuka. We're eventually going to have to put on a good show..... I hope that you can at least put forth as much research on the Taizan Fukun Ritual as possible. After all, it failed back during the war."

Yashamaru said with a laugh.

A hair-raising light shone coldly from the eye beneath his monocle.

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His control was still insufficient. In the end, he couldn't say he had succeeded in controlling it at this stage.

But he was slowly understanding 'ways to use it'. It wasn't that easy, but he was slowly getting the feel for it.

"Haaaaaaah!"

Ignoring the roar that came from his throat, Touji focused his excited mind on the battle in front of him.

His third seal was currently released. Touji was transformed into his armored form, a flaming body of demonic aura, as he took part in a fierce battle.

The location was the same training place as always. It was the sealed-off first-class magic practice field next to the old abandoned Onmyou Academy building. Touji's opponent was one of the Twelve Divine Generals,

Independent Exorcist Kagami Reiji. Kagami calmly dodged the shockwave-producing onslaught of the demonized Touji.

His expression looked calm, but actually he could lose his life at any time. Touji finally took a moment to catch his breath from the full-force assault urged on by his demonic power. Just like how Touji might become a demon with one wrong step, his training opponent Kagami could lose his life with one wrong step. But Kagami was calm and put on his best performance.

There was no room to be distracted, nor did he have the leisure to go easy. Touji had gradually become able to calmly analyze the battle after learning this. Kagami was fighting with Touji knowing that he was in severe danger of losing his life. Having such an attitude was a great benefit in the battle, but it wasn't something that was easily imitated.

It was control over the battle itself and not just strength.

...This was it.

Touji had finally reached 'that stage' after braving the danger of demonic transformation, using his demonic power to its limits, and establishing a foundation of real combat experience. Though some conditions had been added that were dangerous enough to scare him and severely restrict his freedom, Touji had found the strength to overcome them.

The next step was to figure out how to use the strength he had developed to this level and how to control it.

The focus was on strategy and ways of combat. It was meaningless to rev his engine up to the max if he couldn't even attack at that speed.

To be honest, it already took his power just to maintain that speed.

But speed was just a means to an end. In other words, it wasn't something 'necessary'.

Here was the true problem.

"Uooooh!"

He roared like a tiger and moved like a cheetah. Touji used the reins that bound tightly around the oni as he desperately thought of strategy. A world where one misstep would destroy him revealed itself at a speed that his eyes almost couldn't keep up with. It was the will of 'Touji' that was reflected in the battle, not the will of the 'oni'. Bit by bit, step by step.

Soon afterwards, Kagami's movements also started changing. He stopped solely dodging and began attacking Touji. A completely head-on attack. Taking the attack, Touji almost lost his control over the oni, but gritted his teeth and pulled back on the reins to regain dominance. It felt as if he were riding a stallion or a high-output motorcycle. He strode forward violently, rocking at the helm, and fought explosively.

There were probably only a handful of Onmyouji who could fight head-on with the current Touji. Getting used to this feeling of power, Touji greedily absorbed this rare battle experience.

However,

"......Tch."

Kagami suddenly clicked his tongue and changed his stance. With his demonic power at full force, Touji was unable to stop his momentum, but Kagami swiftly dodged back with flawless movements.

Then,

"Touji. Seal yourself again. If this goes on the barrier won't be able to stand it."

"...!"

He hastily 'looked' over after hearing this. Just like Kagami said, the permanent barrier set up in the training area - one of the best barriers in the nation when it had been put up - was creaking and on the verge of crumbling.

"Reboot!"

The seal cast on Touji's body rapidly bound the oni alongside his shout.

The armor and materialized flame on Touji's body vanished together. Then, he was assaulted by a feeling as if his vitality were stolen away, his physical strength surging away in a wave.

He inadvertently staggered. "...Ugh!" He gritted his teeth and stabilized his body as it was about to collapse, putting his hands on his knees to keep his balance.

Touji regulated his frantic breathing, managing to win against the temptation to sit down on the ground. All that supported his body right now was his own stubbornness.

Even if he reapplied the third seal after releasing it, he would lose his fighting power for some time. But he couldn't be overcome by such a huge flaw every time. At the least, he had to be able to escape on his own after re-sealing himself.

Just then,

"Touji-sama."

A kimono-wearing young woman hurried over from a corner of the arena. She was Suisen, the shikigami who had been taking care of Touji's group.

Suisen came to Touji's side, taking out healing charms and sticking them on Touji's body. The healing charms let him properly catch his breath, but his body still couldn't move. He had always been confident in his physical strength, but conquering this feeling of fatigue require quite the courage.

From the side, Suisen watched her hardworking master with a pleased look. Her master had specifically ordered her not to do anything until it was necessary.

Though Suisen was Touji's shikigami, the contract between the two of them was just one where he provided her with magical energy. She actually served the other person who was in hiding with Touji.

"Hmm, it's your first draw, isn't it, Touji?"

That other person smiled happily as he spoke, waving the fan in his hand.

He was an old man who had been sitting in a wheelchair on the side of the arena watching the battle with Suisen. He was dressed up prim and proper - a three-piece suit, a slanted hat on his head, and a scarf. His eyes held an ageless vitality, making him seem like he wasn't actually old.

He was the former Chief of the Mystical Investigators, Amami Daizen. Now his magical energy was being sealed, and he could only move with a wheelchair. He was Touji's current boss.

Touji looked at Amami, trying to regulate his erratic breathing.

Speaking of which, this was the first time he had been able to 'control' it until training ended. Touji had always reached his limits and been forced to stop the training in the past.

And come to think of it, the tie was the result of Kagami holding back. Though Kagami was seriously fighting with Touji, he wasn't using all his power to win. Even if he did attack a few times without holding back, they were deliberate head-on attacks. If Kagami purely wanted to 'defeat' Touji, he could do so easily.

In contrast to Touji, who still couldn't stand straight after healing charms, Kagami was just at the level of breathing hard with his shoulders hunched after interrupting the training. He walked straight over to pick up his jacket with no intention of listening to what Amami had to say. Carefully 'looking' at him only revealed that his aura was slightly erratic after the intense battle, but otherwise normal as if nothing at all had happened. How vexing.

...But I got a bit closer to you again.....

Now he finally saw how to pursue that back in the distance. The distance between him and Kagami was surely narrowing. At least he had gotten that good feeling from this fight.

I can fight.

Firmly directing this faith into his heart, Touji stubbornly stood up straight.

"This barrier really is wailing. This barrier that should even be fine in the face of a materialized spiritual disaster running amok.

Kagami snorted at the sighing Amami, glancing at Touji over his sunglasses.

With a snickering, debasing tone that was completely like Kagami's style, he said "You're finally starting to look alright, demon-boy. Though it's only your horsepower."

He used the same irritating tone, but his words surprised Touji and Amami. After all, it was incredibly rare for that Kagami to praise someone.

"Hm~? Touji, you're pretty amazing for that Independent Officer to recognize you."

"If you're to become my shikigami, it would be inconceivable for you to be unable to reach your current level. It's be annoying as hell if I hit you when I was pissed and you died from it, brat."

Kagami threw arrogant, detestable words at Touji.

Becoming a shikigami - that was one of the conditions Kagami had made when he accepted Touji's request for training. The condition was that if Touji fell and became a demon during the training, Kagami would take him as a shikigami. Touji and Amami had constantly been on their guard for Kagami pulling some kind of trick since accepting that condition, but Kagami hadn't done anything to deliberately send Touji's demonic power out of control at all. Rather, he held out merciless Spartan training with Touji so diligently that it surprised them.

Today too, Kagami had summoned Touji for training.

The deal between Kagami and Touji was that, as compensation for Kagami holding special training for Touji, Touji and Amami would give Kagami any information about Harutora and Ohtomo. In other words, once Touji got his hands on some information, he had to immediately contact Kagami as the price for the training.

But today it was Kagami who had first brought up this time before working hours before requesting that they provide information. The deal with Kagami had continued for more than a year, and such cases had happened many times.

...Unexpectedly, he might be warming up.

It would be annoying as hell if Touji were at a level where he randomly died. That sentence wasn't restricted to the scenario where Touji was Kagami's shikigami. In mock battle after mock battle, Touji had also slowly understood what kind of a person Kagami was. That man was extremely serious and completely sincere about magic. No one knew whether Kagami and Touji would be enemies after this, but he wanted to have a good fight if that time came. He was definitely looking forward to it.

And.....

"Hey, as I was saying. You're about able to move properly, right? If you can move, it's about time to get on with the main business."

"Hah? What main business?"

"Keh. What are you pretending at, old man. You guys have been pretty hyped up since last month. In other words, something new has happened."

Touji and Amami inadvertently traded glances at Kagami's accusation. Though something had certainly happened, they hadn't thought Kagami would notice.

As Kagami said, his motivation right now was worlds different from his motivation last year.

He was working harder than before, but he had also formed a calm judgment ability. After objectively analyzing himself, he had reached the conclusion that he couldn't go without a hardworking mentality. Touji didn't hesitate to get reckless when he felt that he needed to in order to reach his destination.

But like today, calm calculations weren't the only thing that drove Touji on. There were also irrational, vexing thoughts along with impulses he couldn't suppress, burning emotions, and a fire that Tenma had ignited in him on television that day.

It was a fact that Natsume had returned. Tenma had the mettle to convey this to them.

Anticipating that the time was coming, Touji couldn't help but charge forward after laying low for a long time. It definitely wasn't because he was happy, was it.....?

No, wait.

It was because he was happy. He couldn't deny an excitement like that on the eve of a festival. Perhaps Amami felt almost the same. He was excited enough that Kagami, who they only met occasionally, had seen through him instantly.

But - that was natural. The two of them had hid underground and endured this long for this day.

".....Even so, you must be really worried to come over for the 'main business'."

But Kagami didn't respond to Touji's challenging provocation.

His mouth curled into a cold, fickle smile.

He said almost self-mockingly:

"......What's wrong with that? I've certainly thought that the current situation wasn't bad."

"What?"

"Nothing, it's my business."

Kagami shrugged as he spoke.

The wheelchair-bound Amami stared at Kagami and his strange attitude. Touji eyed Kagami with the same suspicious look, but was ultimately unable to see through what the young Onmyouji was thinking. A detestable silence covered the arena and Suisen looked restlessly between the three of them.

"Hey, Touji."

Kagami's vague words broke the silence.

"When the time comes, don't pull something shameful like dying right off the bat, alright? Or else I'll look like a fool for spending more than a year training you."

That was obvious.

Touji glared back at Kagami without speaking a word. Then, he silently replied with a nod.

"I know. Look forward to it."

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What a pain. She focused on keeping a wry smile off her face as she sat elegantly on the sofa, wearing a professional smile.

In the receiving room[3] of the Onmyou Academy building, four people including Kyouko smiled around a table.

Sitting next to Kyouko was an old man wearing a suit - the current principal of the Onmyou Academy. Across from her was a young female reporter holding a notebook and pen, along with a photographer who pointed the lens of his camera at her every so often. In addition to four cups of cooled green tea, a voice recorder was on the table.

This was an interview for a magazine.

"Kyouko-san's father is Chief Kurahashi Genji, right? In other words, Kyouko-san is the daughter of the famous Kurahashi family--"

The principal gracefully replied something like "Yes, that's indeed the case, as you say" to the smiling female reporter asking a question she knew the answer to.

"Chief Kurahashi himself is a National First-Class Onmyouji, and Kyouko-san inherits the Kurahashi bloodline. Kyouko-san stands a head above the excellent Onmyouji gathered in the academy from over the entire nation....."

"And you have such stunning looks. Kyouko-san, you must be very popular among the male students, right?"

[3] A room made to receive guests.

"No no, you're exaggerating....."

"Hahaha, she's the daughter of the Kurahashi family, so she's an unreachable flower in the eyes of the male students."

"Oh my, doesn't that feel upsetting for you as a girl?"

"No no, you're exaggerating....."

Keeping up this deliberate smile was making her face muscles cramp up a bit. Her only salvation was that she didn't have to spend effort thinking about what to say, thanks to the principal replying to the reporter's every question before she said anything. That said, she wondered whether the principal could make some more normal reply, but the principal seemed quite happy.

The current principal was a temporary Onmyou Academy principal that the Onmyou Agency had arranged for, a replacement for Kyouko's grandmother Kurahashi Miyo. He looked like one of her father's followers, but it looked more like he submitted before her father's powerful image than he actually held the same ideology. In that sense, it was correct to call him a peaceful, 'normal' person. He would probably faint if he learned that her father was the mastermind behind the Twin-Horned Syndicate.

He was making various reforms to the Onmyou Academy's ways in order to change the exclusive impression of Onmyouji and to cooperate with the opening of the magic community that her father advocated. Activities like magazine interviews with students were one kind of these reforms.

Kyouko secretly glanced at the table. Other than the green tea placed in front of her, there was also the business card that the female reporter had given her before the interview.

The magazine was called the 'Monthly Onmyouji'.

Though the title was very stiff, it wasn't actually a professional magazine. Instead, it was a magazine covering topics on magic and Onmyouji aimed towards ordinary readers. It was the most classic name among similar magazines. Indeed, this 'Monthly Onmyouji' had been the first to call the Onmyouji who passed the Onmyou First-Class exam the 'Twelve Divine Generals'.

Kyouko had once loved to read the special section of the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka, and even now they were put away in some corner of her room. Although thinking of the exaggerated, idol-like Suzuka from those reports now made a kind of bitterness rise up in her heart.

"I see~~, how interesting. Actually, when I came to view the New Year's Ceremony last month, I was completely drawn in by Kyouko-san's shikigami dance. Not only is she beautiful and an outstanding student, Kyouko-san has an extremely good disposition. Kyouko-san will certainly be a future Divine General and the star of the next generation."

"So very true. After all, many of the Divine Generals are graduates of this academy. Our Onmyou Academy's roster is quite famous, isn't it? Right, Kyouko-san?"

"No no, you're exaggerating....."

Kyouko felt more and more fatigued as she carefully answered the courteous questions.

According to what they said, the Onmyou Academy New Year's Festival that had been broadcasted live on television last month had caused quite a stir among the Monthly Onmyouji readership. Since it was very rare for an error to happen in the middle.

An unexpected group of shikigami had formed during the shikigami group dance, leading to the failure of the dance.

In the end, the reasons weren't understood. The principal had squelched the topic, choosing to brush it off rather than probe for reasons. Their former teacher Fujiwara-sensei had resigned at the same time as her grandmother. With that, perhaps Kyouko was the only one in the Onmyou Academy who knew the 'culprit' of this 'incident'.

A warm light shone in Kyouko's heart when she thought of the scene from back then.

Who would have known that she would be chosen like this.

Allegedly, the Monthly Onmyouji's interview this time was to ask about things related to that New Year's Ceremony, but they hadn't received permission from the principal and they hadn't been able to publish a report on the New Year's Ceremony last month. Wanting to get some dirt on the incident before it subsided, they had set their eyes on the next-best target, Kyouko - that was probably what this development was about.

According to what the female reporter said, it seemed like the readers of their magazine wanted Kyouko to become a new professional idol in place of the Child Prodigy who hadn't shown her face in a long time. Give me a break.

...Anyway, it would be nice if she could be inconspicuous and avoid interviews like Tenma.

That said, she had been suddenly called over without warning for an interview this morning, so she hadn't prepared anything.

First off, her divination practice was still continuing, but she hadn't been able to see anything new about Harutora, Natsume, or Ohtomo. Now that everything she did was being monitored, it was best not to provoke any unnecessary suspicion. Because of that, she concealed her true disaffection in her heart.

"Oh right, Kyouko-san? Two years ago, you were at school with the Child Prodigy Dairenji Suzuka when she became a special student, right? Did you get along well with her?"

"Hm? Ah, yes."

Kyouko accidentally stopped smiling at the sudden question and nodded unconsciously.

Upon seeing this reaction, the female reporter smiled proudly and continued asking:

"As I thought, you got along very well as top students?"

"Y-Yeah. Uh... we talked a lot, and..... and..... um, Su-- Dairenji-san really looked up to me. Yeah."

"I see. As I thought, 'birds of a feather' still holds true."

She took notes as she looked at Kyouko.

"Dairenji-san's already returned to the Onmyou Agency now. Are you still in contact with her?"

"N-No..... She's very busy, I think..... And it might not be good for a student to be too familiar with a National First-Class Onmyouji from the outside."

It was true that she couldn't contact Suzuka. After all, Suzuka and Kyouko were both actually being imprisoned. In addition to contact with each other, contact with the outside was extremely difficult.

Because of that, Kyouko felt heartfelt gratitude for the next question.

"Do you have anything you'd like to say to Dairenji-san in the Onmyou Agency?"

She couldn't say the important part, but at least this could reach her.

"......I'm always supporting her. Even if we can't meet, I'm always supporting her."

★

In the end, the interview continued for more than an hour after school ended.

The students had mostly all returned to their dorms, and Kyouko was left to walk out of the back door alone. Now that Kyouko's life was being monitored, she had to be driven to and from school. Of course, taking small roads was forbidden. She had gotten used to driving around the academy by car.

There weren't even any students left in the hallways to talk to Kyouko. She silently headed to the back door.

Just then.

"Aah, great, I found you."

"Ah, uh, you're the one from before....."

On her way to the back door, someone suddenly called out to Kyouko. It was the female reporter of the Monthly Onmyouji from earlier. The cameraman wasn't with her, so it was just her.

"I heard that you took a car from the back door every day, so I waited for you."

"Ah....."

The female reporter smiled at the confused Kyouko.

"Sorry for suddenly calling out to you. Can I have a bit of your time again?"

"Eh? Are you continuing the interview? Then you need to ask the principal for permission....."

"AH, it's alright, it's alright, I'm not asking about the New Year's Ceremony."

"But....."

Kyouko looked towards the back door. After she walked out the door, she would immediately be pulled into the car by members of her household and shuttled back home.

But though the female reporter asked for permission, she pulled Kyouko into an empty classroom of her own volition. Even if she was a member of the media, she treated underage students in a surprising way.

Those thoughts were immediately expressed on her face. The woman laughed devilishly.

"Your family members will capture you once you go out, right? Here, have this."

".....Canned coffee?"

"I bought it before coming here, it's probably already cold."

"Ah, no, that's not what I meant....."

She ignored Kyouko's confused expression and thrust the coffee towards her.

The reporter was very young, probably twenty years old. Her inconspicuous suit and pants were indistinguishable from a normal office lady's.

But Kyouko's interest was piqued when she noticed her expression changing, especially by her vitality-filled eyes. They had maintained a distance during the interview from before, since it would be unprofessional of them to be too involved.

After giving Kyouko coffee and opening her own share, she said in a friendly voice:

"Sorry. I actually wanted to invite you to a nice coffee place, but it looks like you don't even have the freedom to do that. Man, it was hard work, you know? It was really tough to get an opportunity to approach you. I definitely wouldn't be able to handle that way of life. You've for some strong endurance."

"....."

Kyouko finally became alert.

Even though Kyouko was the daughter of the Kurahashi family, she wouldn't have investigated this much beforehand for a mere student interview.

".....Who are you?"

"Eh? Ahh, don't worry. The Monthly Onmyouji identity wasn't a lie. The business card from before was also real. Do you remember my name?"

".....Wakamiya Rika of the Editorial Division."

"Oh, amazing, as expected of a top student. Ah, also, I have no relationship to your distant Wakasugi relatives. It's 'miya', not 'sugi'. There are occasionally people named Kurahashi in the Editorial Department too; I really can't stand this industry."

The woman - Wakamiya - replied casually to the guarded Kyouko.

The Wakasugi family were indeed distant relatives of the Kurahashi family. More accurately, the Kurahashi and Wakasugi were both branch families of the Tsuchimikado. But unlike how the Kurahashi family was in the spotlight of the magic community, the Wakasugi family was not well-known. The fact that she said this was proof that she was an 'insider' of the magic community.

That said, she couldn't drop her guard.

"So, what do you need?"

Wakamiya adjusted her posture again, seeming troubled over what stance to take.

Soon after that, Wakamiya pointed at Kyouko with her index finger while holding the canned coffee:

"In short, please tell me about your Tsuchimikado classmates. Both Harutora and Natsume. Also Ato Touji and Dairenji Suzuka like we talked about earlier. And in particular - about the incident last summer during the Sumida fireworks festival."

She reflexively gulped and looked at Wakamiya with wide eyes.

She had a faint premonition, but hadn't thought she would be pressed so far.

Wakamiya was still smiling. But she stared at Kyouko with a serious look.

"The Onmyou Agency completely blotted out that incident, but there are quite a few people who were at the scene who have doubts. Have you seen the discussions about this online?"

"......No."

"Oh. Well, I don't recommend it. Most of them are people taking advantage of the chaos to write whatever they like. But objectively, it's true that there are some unnatural places in the Onmyou Agency's statement. Also, it's very strange how dogged the Onmyou Agency is - they're even mobilizing Independent Exorcists and Special Sensers to track down Tsuchimikado Harutora. It's also true that an underage boy can't be prosecuted, but the Onmyou Agency's treating him like a terrorist. As Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation."

The most important point. Wakamiya continued speaking as Kyouko gasped:

"No one's going to believe you if you say you don't know about these things, you know? You were friends with the Tsuchimikados, right?"

It was more like a confirmation than a question. Wakamiya stared at Kyouko, interested more in Kyouko's reaction than her verbal answer. Kyouko bit her lip.

A completely unexpected situation. She had to be calm and think.....

But there was nothing she could do. Kyouko could only give up and slump her shoulders.

...There was nothing she could do about this situation.

It wasn't her own fault, it was an accident. Kyouko sighed lightly, her expression becoming stern.

She formed a seal with her left hand that wasn't holding the coffee. Surprised, Wakamiya hastily backed up. Kyouko didn't use magic right away. She just gathered an appropriate amount of magical energy, turned her body, and thrust her hand out behind her.

Just then, a space slightly above Kyouko's head with nothing in it twisted and reacted to the magical energy Kyouko released.

"...Eh? W-What?"

"A shikigami."

"A shikigami? Yours?"

"No."

Kyouko stopped her dramatizing and smiled self-derisively.

"It's a monitoring shikigami that my father put on me. In other words, it heard all the questions you just asked."

Though the shikigami wasn't stealthed and its aura was visible, it wasn't usually materialized and hence people without the spirit-sensing ability couldn't spot it. After seeing the distorted space in the air and hearing Kyouko's explanation, Wakamiya also noticed it and suddenly dropped her cheerful expression.

Kyouko smiled wryly and said "Sorry" to the female reporter staring over at her.

"But I can't do anything about it. All I can tell you is about this shikigami. Is that enough to cover the coffee?"

After frankly saying what she had to, Kyouko folded her arms.

She couldn't actually do anything, just like she had thought before. As a result of this, Kyouko's monitoring would be strengthened, the Onmyou Agency would complain to the Monthly Onmyouji, and Wakamiya would therefore be punished. It was all unavoidable, and their powerless selves could only accept it.

Wakamiya stared at the distorted space for a while.

Then she returned her gaze to Kyouko.

"Thanks. You're very nice."

She thanked Kyouko with a smile.

She used a very calm tone. Also, her smile was even more natural than before.

But when she opened her mouth again...

"But..... To be honest, it's not like I didn't anticipate this situation."

"......Eh?"

"I knew you were being completely monitored after investigating you a little..... I got quite a bit of information during that, too. So I was prepared to be exposed. I don't know how many times I've been reprimanded by my boss by now, especially about your business."

She spread her hands and blinked, feigning a foolish attitude as she spoke.

She was very laid-back, but her expression was still serious. Kyouko's feelings became muddled again and she wasn't sure how to reply.

"Why are you....."

"A hobby."

"......It's not work?"

"Of course there are also work reasons. In society, there are jobs taken to earn a living, and there are jobs taken for other reasons. This job is on both sides. How should I describe it, it's kind of like my mission. You'll understand some day when you start working."

Wakamiya spoke indifferently without any banter. Kyouko didn't know how to respond to this.

"And to be honest, there are actually some personal reasons too."

"......Personal reasons? What personal reasons?"

"Actually, my older sister was an Onmyouji. But she wasn't in the Onmyou Agency, she worked here."

"Here..... in the Onmyou Academy?"

"Yeah, she was a teacher. Though she died a long time ago."

Kyouko stopped talking when she heard that she had died.

That said, there was no gloominess on Wakamiya's face. Her expression was even a bit embarrassed.

"......Is your sister's death related to why you're investigating that incident?"

"It's not directly related. Probably. But I've always distrusted the Onmyou Agency since my sister's death. During my current work, I've also noticed that I'm not the only one who doesn't trust the Onmyou Agency. So I think that my mission is to investigate the suspicious things of this world. Though my boss scolds me saying things like how I'm ten years too early."

At the end, she furrowed her brow and gulped down the remaining half-can of coffee in one go, sighing.

Anyway, I'll withdraw for today, I don't want to bother you too much. Sorry. But just remember that I'm around; I might be able to help you out some day."

Of course, Kyouko couldn't say much with the shikigami monitoring her, nor could she reply with 'got it'. Wakamiya didn't expect a response either. She waved lightly and went towards the exit with an "I'm off".

"Oh, right." She stopped in front of the door.

"Kyouko-chan, can you reveal any information on someone who's not a student?"

"......Who?"

"Your class's teacher, Ohtomo Jin. He also disappeared after that incident, right?"

An unexpected name was brought up. As Kyouko had thought, she had done a lot of investigation beforehand.

But Kyouko didn't know about Ohtomo-sensei's whereabouts either. Actually, Kyouko even wanted someone to tell her about it.

She prudently shook her head without saying a word. Wakamiya laughed lightly, not seeming very dejected.

"......What about Ohtomo-sensei?"

"Hmm. Well, I'll tell you what I heard. The 'personal reasons' unrelated to you that I mentioned before are involve him."

That moment.

...!

Her consciousness swelled up and an inexplicable sensation spread out before her.

The scenery before her eyes was a vast, boundless universe. Groups of stars glittered palely like beautiful lights.

This was a sign of her divination. Hastily grabbing on to the feeling she had finally gotten used to recently, Kyouko entered a stupor. Her body flowed along with it, but she still kept her self-consciousness. She floated up - leaving the ground.

It happened in an instant. Wakamiya didn't notice anything at all, and continued speaking in the same tone:

"My sister was Ohtomo Jin's teacher when he was still a student at the Onmyou Academy. There was him, Kogure Zenjirou of the Twelve Divine Generals, and another person. Anyways, she always used to tell me things about the Three Ravens of the Thirty-Sixth at home. Of course, that was when she was alive."

She deliberately put on a sentimental expression and spoke somewhat lonesomely.

Kyouko's heartbeat raced as her heart felt the abnormality that was occurring right now.

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The new office building of the leading consumer magical tool manufacturer, Witchcraft, was in Nihonbashi. The old office building was in Waseda.

The old office building was now used for the development of magical tools, and its name had been changed to the 'development center'. But the company members called it the 'workshop', since it had been an automobile and motorcycle factory before. Even now, traces of its past could be seen in its exterior.

The development center was quite small compared to the new office building. But Tenma felt that the old office building was nostalgic. When he was small - when his parents had still been alive - the two of them would often bring him here to play.

He hadn't visited this place for a long time since his parents had died.

But recently, he had been showing his face here every month.

"Oh, Tenma, you're here. Come in, come in."

"Morning, Tsuru. Sorry to bother."

A man wearing work clothes came outside to welcome Tenma.

He was just over forty, with a tall, strong body without an ounce of extra fat. He had skin bronzed from the sun and, unexpectedly, had his hair in a pompadour. This man who didn't look at all like an Onmyouji was the manager here.

His name was Tsuruta Kameo. The name sounded like a joke[4], but it was his actual name. But it had been none other than Tenma's parents who had hired him here just on the basis of his name. He was also an old entrepreneur who had been at the Witchcraft Corporation for a long time like Tenma's parents.

After Tsuruta led Tenma in, they walked straight on in.

The employees they passed by all cheerfully greeted Tenma when they saw him. This was probably an effect of the manager Tsuruta as well. Also, he had come here so many times that everyone easily recognized him. Maybe some of them had also heard about Tenma's situation. Tenma greeted each and every one of them as he entered the corridor with Tsuruta.

He was brought to Tsuruta's office, the manager's office on the second floor. But though it was a manager's office, it was actually car warehouse with a work desk installed. Tools and magical implements were scattered everywhere. Even the top of the computer was opened, and one could tell at a glance that it was self-assembled.

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[4] Most likely a reference to the old japanese proverb "Tsuru Sen-nen, Kame Man-nen", which means "the crane lives for 1,000 years, the turtl for 10,000 years" ("tsuru" means crane and "kame" means turtle).

Tenma was dazed by visiting after so many years. Everything had changed greatly from when his parents had been in charge.

After Tsuruta let Tenma have a seat,

"Want a cup of coffee? Though I just ran out of sugar."

"Thank you very much."

"Want milk?"

"No need."

"Haha, you can even drink black coffee now. When you drank black coffee as a kid, you spit it out so dramatically, remember?"

"It was a long time ago, so I don't remember it."

"What? I even cleaned it up for you."

Tsuruta smiled as he poured coffee into the plastic cup. Tenma thanked him and accepted the coffee he handed over. He changed his originally formal demeanor to keep from upsetting Tsuruta.

Witchcraft was the company that Tenma's parents had managed. Tenma only had some vague memories from when he had been small, but he clearly remembered the young man that his parents had affectionately called 'Tan Boy'. Tsuruta hadn't forgotten about him either. During the summer two years ago, the Momoe family had suddenly gotten a call from Tsuruta asking whether he wanted to come to the workplace.

It seemed like Tsuruta had been worried about Tenma losing his parents. It seemed like he knew about Tenma being admitted to the Onmyou Academy and had considered it a good time to say hello to him.

"I have a lot to thank your parents for."

Tsuruta said this to Tenma after their long-awaited reunion.

"Though a lot of things have changed, your parents would be happy if you worked here."

To be honest, he had been confused at first. But a great joy had immediately followed that. That was because he hadn't imagined there was still someone who so respected his parents. And with his nostalgia about the old office building, being able to come back and see it practically moved him to tears. Tenma accepted Tsuruta's goodwill and accepted a tour of the 'workshop'.

"So how are things? Can you pass the Second-Class Onmyou exam?"

"Hmm - Will I pass?"

"Hey hey, don't be too lax, the test is next month."

"It was always supposed to be a hurdle, so it won't be that easy."

"Work hard. Even with my authority, I can't accept anyone who hasn't passed the exam."

He poured coffee for himself, boldly laughing at Tenma's timidity.

In contrast to how Tsuruta enthusiastically invited him to Witchcraft, Tenma himself didn't have any clear plans. Though he was living with his Momoe grandparents, the two of them hadn't gotten along with his mother and had almost been estranged.

The Momoe family on his mother's side had been a family of Onmyouji extending back to the Edo period. Originally, her husband ought to have inherited the Momoe family, but his free-spirited mother had been unable to accept the Momoe family's traditional ways and had left with his father, never coming back to her old family even once before she died.

After his parents died, his grandparents accepted him when he had no family to belong to.

During his life with his grandparents, Tenma had started to understand their true feelings towards his mother bit by bit. They didn't resent or hate his mother for betraying the family. But they were surprised, hurt, and didn't know what to do about his mother's betrayal.

Forever losing any opportunities to reconcile, his grandparents' thoughts about his mother were forever unrequited and stuck in the past.

Witchcraft was actually the company that his mother had established after betraying his grandparents. Tenma couldn't resolve himself to work there. Catching wind of this, Tsuruta didn't push the invitation any further.

...Also.....

Before he was able to obtain qualifications or not, he still didn't know 'what to do'. If he wasn't careful - no, it was actually quite possible - the Onmyou Agency would investigate him. If he were in that company, he would definitely trouble the company and Tsuruta.

...Or maybe it's already very dangerous.....

Tenma had received that message from Natsume last month and mixed a large amount of materialized shikigami into the shikigami group dance of the Onmyou Agency's New Year's Celebration. His goal was to secretly inform his friends about Natsume's return under the Mystical Investigators' noses.

The shikigami he had used at the time were the blue, swallow-shaped 'Type WA Swallow Whips' produced by the Witchcraft Corporation. The Swallow Whips were the most suited to convey the information that Tenma wanted.

But manmade shikigami charms were expensive, and they weren't things that Tenma could easily buy dozens of with his own means. And more importantly, the Swallow Whips were binding-type shikigami. Witchcraft's main customer for them was the Onmyou Agency Mystical Investigators, and they didn't sell to many others. It was very difficult to obtain that many.

It was Tsuruta who had acquired so many shikigami charms for Tenma. He had gotten his hands on some unused old charms claiming that they were for study, but actually the true goal was for 'that event'.

Fortunately, no one had investigated who the main culprit behind the commotion was, and they just took it as someone's prank. But as soon as someone felt that something felt wrong and started investigating the Swallow Whips, it was very possible that Tsuruta would get in trouble. Tenma hadn't thought things out carefully at first since he didn't have enough time, and now he was upset with his lack of forethought.

But.....

Though he realized it was heartless, if someone asked him whether he was conscious that 'using the Swallow Whips would bring Tsuruta trouble' and whether he would have stopped his plans..... The answer was 'no'.

Even if he brought great trouble to the person who had always taken care of him, Tenma would work towards his foremost priority.

...That was pretty heartless.

If he thought that way, how was he different from a terrorist? In the end, he would do anything 'for his goals'. That was why he didn't know what to think. If he didn't draw a line somewhere, some day Tenma would no longer be Tenma.

.....He had thought so much about it, and still ended up coming in to bother him and drink coffee. How thick-skinned.

In any case, he was happy about meeting Tsuruta. Even if it had now become the 'workshop', every corner was still filled with beautiful memories with his parents. It was a nice feeling.

"Right, Tenma, I have some more useless shikigami charms. Do you want to bring them back with you?"

Being asked this as he was still introspecting made his heart pound.

He forced a smile and replied:

"Ah, thanks a lot. But I've already figured it out, so I won't need them this time."

"Hey, no need to be polite."

"I still haven't used all the ones I got last time..... And you know, I, uh, I'm still working hard to prepare for the exam, so I won't have time to mess with them even if I bring them back."

As he refused and shied away, Tsuruta smiled with a strange expression and said, "Ahh, I see."

...Speaking of which.....

He really wanted to ask Tsuruta whether he knew about the New Year's Ceremony incident. In this field of work, and especially for someone with a position like Tsuruta had, people would naturally look to the Onmyou Agency to discover new talent. Actually, there were many graduates of the Onmyou Academy in Witchcraft.

Also, even if Tsuruta himself didn't know, there had to be a couple workers who did, right? The commotion had been a very popular topic in the industry. They definitely knew.

That Tsuruta would definitely notice the truth on the spot after learning about the New Year's Ceremony incident. After all, they were the shikigami charms that he had given out himself.

But Tsuruta didn't mention a word of the New Year's Ceremony in front of Tenma.

He didn't know, then. Or maybe he had noticed but deliberately didn't say anything. If it were the latter, then what were Tsuruta's motives?

Was he secretly colluding with the Mystical Investigators? He wasn't willing to think that way. But Tenma had to think about every possibility right now, including this one. Whether he believed them or not was up to his judgment.

It would be best to keep his distance from him.

But Tenma had chosen to trust him.

The more dangerous the crisis, the more he had to believe in his friends.

"Well, I won't force them on you if you don't want them. Instead, you should hurry up and see if you can make your own shikigami."

"To join Witchcraft?"

"Naturally, that would be the best. But actually it's not important. I just want to see a shikigami that you made with your own hands, Tenma."

"I'm not as talented as my mom and dad."

"Do you think only talented people can make interesting shikigami? You're too naive, Tenma. Actually, the shikigami that idiots make are the monsters that you can't underestimate. And didn't I say? No matter what your mom was like, your dad was a complete and utter idiot."

An unexpected reply. "Really?" He asked back, and Tsuruta answered with a reddened face.

"Or else he - Ahh, no, never mind."

He hastily shut his mouth before he got carried away and waved it by.

Tenma's mother was actually famous in the industry. She had invented the popular Swallow Whip and had been an ace designer of the Witchcraft Corporation.

But the biggest legacy she left was starting the trend of shikigami 'for a specific purpose that anyone could use with the same effectiveness'. The general-type and binding-types that shikigami were divided into now were all started from various types of her shikigami. She was a notable figure who could be included in magic history textbooks.

Concealed by that brilliance, the work of Tenma's father was not very well-known. Even Tenma didn't understand it.

He only remembered him tinkering with machines in the workshop wearing the 'Ace Engineer' badge on his shoulder. Now that he recalled it, he had been making vessels of mechanical-type shikigami. But the impression his father gave off was more like an engineer than an inventor.

"Did my dad make shikigami?"

"Of course. In terms of numbers, he made several times more than your mom, you know? Though the number he made that could actually be used was less than half that of your mom..... But who knows. They were all mysterious things."

Tsuruta smiled as he said,

"Why don't you come look at an actual product? We still have some of his test products left behind."

"Ah, sure, okay! Thank you."

After he actually saw them, they really were stupid and mysterious things.

There were ones comical enough to provoke laughs, and there were ones that made him speechless. But he could see that every vessel was a product that his father had poured his heart into. The vessels his father had created were all infused with the creator's painstaking effort.

".....You really didn't throw these away and held on to them until now, huh."

"Hmm? Well, it's all my good management. No matter how shoddy the craftsmanship is - the sentiment, it's the sentiment that's the most important. After all, this is the company that your parents built up together."

Tsuruta spoke happily about the past. It wasn't clear how much of it was a joke.

Time passed without him noticing as he looked back and forth among his father's inventions. Realizing that the sun was about to set, Tenma hastily prepared to leave the 'workshop'.

"Thanks. Today was really fun."

"Oh, it was nothing, is that enough to satisfy you? Someday I'll show you your dad's best work."

"It's even more 'out there' than what I saw today?"

"A man doesn't go back on his word! I guarantee it!"

Tsuruta guaranteed, full of self-confidence. Tenma smiled.

Just then,

"Ah, right. Tenma, I have to bother you with this. Throw these away for me on your way back."

Tsuruta gave him a paper bag.

Tenma took the paper bag and opened it to look inside, and his eyes widened - inside were shikigami charms.

"Hey, Tsuruta-san....."

"Don't grumble, I have to get rid of the old stuff to make space for the new. They're already recorded as discarded, and our company won't sell them. Sentiment's very important."

He looked at the perturbed Tenma as he spoke.

Tenma had been at a loss before, but with this it truly felt like he had 'lost'. It was worth a long laugh, but all that came out of him was a short word:

"...Yeah."

★

By the time he noticed, it was already dusk.

Takahiro, who had been focused on some charms he had gotten his hands on, came out of the bedroom and moved to the kitchen after seeing that no one was there.

He asked his wife, who was preparing dinner:

"Where did Natsume and Akino go?"

"Those two just left. They said they were going to the station to practice stealth magic."

Chizuru replied, cutting the onion on the cutting board with rhythmic chops.

"Just the two of them?"

"Ah, come on. There's no problem if Natsume's there. That girl can already handle things on her own. A few stupid novice Mystical Investigators won't be able to do anything to her. Akino too, she's the best at running away."

Though she didn't say it in front of them, Chizuru had quite high opinions of the two children. And it wasn't just Chizuru. Takahiro calmly accepted his wife's words, frowning but making no rebuttal.

Actually, their powers far surpassed their ages. Though the arrogance of youth was also dangerous, they could overcome that danger with accumulated experience. That was why the two of them were still around.

"But it would be bad if they got spotted, even if they don't get caught."

"Then we'll just move again if that happens. They won't be able to catch us."

"......It was a lot of work to prepare this house."

"That's when it's time to use the strength of an adult, right, Darling?"

Chizuru was a short girl compared to the tall Takahiro. But the adult's strength she was talking about here didn't refer to body size, nor did it refer to the strength that varied between genders.

"......What's for dinner tonight?"

"Hot pot."

"I'm looking forward to your cooking, dear."

"Leave it to me."

Takahiro returned to his bedroom, saying nothing more to his smiling wife.

He walked out to the porch and went down to the courtyard. The courtyard seemed exceptionally quiet without the children - especially when Akino wasn't around. Or rather, their fugitive life was too noisy.

"......We've lived like this for quite a long time."

Takahiro murmured quietly, looking up at the night sky from the courtyard.

The sky was still bright. The faint moonlight quietly shone down from the eastern sky.

He had hid underground with Chizuru and Yasuzumi last year. The Tsuchimikado main family residence had been completely burned down. After a while, they had returned to Tokyo, taking Natsume after she was resurrected with forbidden magic and immediately escaping Tokyo, changing between various locations to avoid the Onmyou Agency's pursuit.

Yasuzumi, Takahiro, Chizuru, and Natsume. The four of them had been joined by Akino after the Seishuku Temple mess last winter. They had come back to Tokyo early this year. What a meandering journey.

We're still alright. When they had been born as or married into the Tsuchimikado family, they had all resolved to be welcome trials and disturbances. Actually, he personally was thankful that he was given this opportunity to train himself. Playing with intrigue and justice wasn't a bad way to living. He didn't feel displeased with being a countryside Onmyou doctor, but he was bored to death without Harutora around.

But considering Natsume and Akino, he couldn't do anything stupid. Especially Akino, who was a wild girl who hadn't received any regular teaching. Though she had been forced to receive some teachings at Seishuku Temple, it still insufficient when he thought about it.

If possible, he would take advantage of the present to hand Akino over to some other household he could trust. Takahiro secretly desired this.

But Akino was a 'living spirit'. In that case, she would be tied up by relationships to the magic world no matter where she was.

Almost all of the current magic community was in the palm of the Onmyou Agency. In other words, it was in the palm of the Kurahashi and the Souma.

And not only was Akino a living spirit, she was also someone with Souma blood.

The Souma had allied with the Yakou-headed Tsuchimikado during the Pacific War in order to realize their clan's desire. But after the war, the Souma family became fragmented and lost their prestige. Perhaps Akino's family had broken off from some other branch of the Souma family back then.

It was impossible to tell how Akino had been entrusted to Seishuku Temple after that. But it was certain that even the core of the Souma family - Souma Takiko - hadn't completely gotten a hold of the state of the Souma family line.

...In that regard, it was a good thing that Akino had been entrusted to Seishuku Temple. No, maybe Akino's parents had given Akino away to avoid the Souma main family's investigation.

It was very possible. In any case, if she didn't have any abilities, the Souma clan wouldn't fixate on Akino.

But.

...Rabbit living spirits were quite rare. There was the danger that information would be exposed to the Onmyou Agency no matter who she was entrusted to.

If they knew that this living spirit was a Souma, then the Souma main family hidden within the Onmyou Agency would definitely make a move for Akino. In other words, it was too dangerous to leave her to an Onmyouji regulated by the Onmyou Agency.

He couldn't leave Akino to a dark Onmyouji organization either.

Then who could he entrust her to? The local Onmyouji were all..... but well, it was Tokyo.

What a pain.

And perhaps the most troublesome part was Akino's own feelings.

Akino had gotten warmed up to Takahiro and got along with Natsume like sisters after their month of living together. It would definitely be a bug shock now to entrust her alone to some other family. She definitely wouldn't accept such a unilateral decision.

Of course, in a critical situation he would do so forcefully if he had to. But would Takahiro alone be able to successfully convince the three women? It would be hard. After all, Takahiro himself didn't want to give Akino away.

He at least wanted to have Yasuzumi read Akino's fortune, but fortunes of living spirits were difficult to decipher. As a result, all he could do was let Akino grow to the level where she could protect herself and stay with her until then.

.....How naive..... Or was it?

Takahiro definitely wouldn't forgive himself if that naivety became Akino's downfall.

But there was nothing else he could do other than adapt to the situation. He sighed and smiled bitterly:

"Raising kids is so hard."

Raising Harutora had been very simple. After all, he was the kind who didn't need adults to fuss over him even if something happened, a kid who 'didn't have any problems'.

.....

Speaking of which, how long had it been since he saw Harutora's face?

"What are you doing right now?"

When he scratched his nose and walked back to the bedroom, he saw Yasuzumi coming down from the second floor. His expression was extremely grim.

"What's wrong?" He asked tensely.

"Takahiro. Let's change locations."

"What? We're moving?"

"Yeah."

He was serious. Yasuzumi didn't joke around.

Chizuru butted in when she heard the activity. She immediately realized the situation upon seeing their expressions.

"The stars?"

"That's right."

"Is it that big activity you talked about?"

"No, this one is different. I felt it before as well - but this time it's closer."

".....Understood."

"We'll move tonight. Chizuru, go prepare now. Call back Natsume and Akino immediately--"

"As expected of Yasuzumi, quite the intuition."

The three of them looked in the other direction at the same time. A young man currently stood in the courtyard where Takahiro had just been. He wore a suit, vest, ascot, and slacks. A monocle covered his right eye, and a chill seeped from his eyes.

It was their first meeting. No, they had met several times in his previous life.

The National First-Class Onmyouji, 'Professor' Dairenji Shidou. The Chief of the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division and the leader of the Twin-Horned Syndicate. The notorious Onmyouji who had caused a spiritual disaster terrorist incident four years ago and who had become a spiritual disaster himself.

Also, the man who had resurrected as the Yase Doji Yashamaru and who was Souma Takiko's defensive shikigami.

Why was he here?

"It's been a year and a half since the Raven's Wing. It's been a good chase..... Well, this is what you get for showing yourself."

With a cold smile, another shikigami released his stealth over by the entrance.

He had the same kind of presence as Yashamaru. The other Yase Doji.

★

Natsume noticed the instability in the air an hour before.

She was close to the JR Kichijoji station. A group of Onmyouji dressed in suits appeared for some reason, without any related facilities nearby. If not for Natsume's usual habit of unconsciously looking at aura, she might not have been able to notice.

Could they be Mystical Investigators?

Their presences seemed very much like it.

".....Stay in stealth."

Fortunately, they still hadn't spotted her. Then she should at least take advantage of that fortune and dig up some information before going back.

Just as she thought this, the Onmyouji suddenly moved as a group. They left a few sentries behind, with the others all moving to a different location. Just then, she clearly saw that they were all wearing hats or scarves to conceal their faces.

As expected, they were Mystical Investigators.

Natsume sent Takahiro a message, looking for an opportunity to go back as she stayed on her guard.

But the Onmyouji left behind didn't make any moves. They just waited in place.

Thanks to that, Natsume and Akino escaped the station without much effort.

Natsume stayed attentive to the surrounding movements on the road back home, still not lowering her guard. Just then, she noticed something very important.

"Ah?"

Her message still hadn't received a reply.

Had he not seen it?

Or were they coming straight here to avoid exposing her through a ringtone?

She hastily called Takahiro's phone. No one picked up. It seemed that it was out of battery, so they must have already gone out to look for Natsume and Akino.

She called Chizuru's number next.

.....Still, no one picked up.

"What's going on....."

It couldn't be that both their phones were out of batter just by coincidence. Also, Chizuru ought to be making dinner right now.....

"....."

She thought of the Onmyouji who had moved out before.

Anxiety.

Anxiety crept up her body.

Maybe she should try calling her stepfather--

But,

"Natsume!? H-Hey!"

A pale-faced Akino pulled on Natsume's sleeve, pointing to a television screen in an electronics store next to them--

'Kichijoji'. 'Tsuchimikado'. 'Arrest'.

Those words were below the image of an old, familiar, two-story building that she had planned on returning to.

Her stepfather's phone wasn't answered either.

".....Damn."

Bring broadcasted on the television was the news of the arrest of Takahiro and the others.

The dial tone switched to the voice prompt announcing that it had been unable to connect, and a foreign-sounding voice came over her phone. Natsume mindlessly gripped her phone, looking at the television screen across the window in despair.

The stars were now moving.

Chapter 3

Kurahashi received a report first thing in the morning when he reached the agency, one that made him rewrite his plans for the day.

"Tsuchimikado Natsume was spotted. The Kadei sisters noticed her."

Kurahashi was a steely man, already over fifty years old. Yashamaru was an extravagant aristocrat, looking no older than twenty. But the two of them had once been the same age and shared ideals for the future of Onmyoudou.

"Really? The two of them saw Tsuchimikado Natsume?"

"They saw traces of a dragon. She was a teenage girl. There shouldn't be anyone other than Natsume who gives off that kind of feeling."

"And the location?"

"Shinjuku, but she ended up moving to Kichijoji."

"Hmph, Kichijoji, huh."

"That's right."

Tsuchimikado Natsume had been resurrected with the Taizan Fukun Ritual by Harutora awakened as Yakou during the summer two years ago. And for some reason, Natsume had been able to use her dragon shikigami as her own power after that. That was a truth that the Mystical Investigator Yamashiro Hayato had witnessed at Seishuku Temple last winter.

Natsume was currently an important hostage for the Onmyou Agency as they pursued Harutora and Ohtomo Jin, and she was the Onmyou Agency's target since she was easier to capture than the other two. There had been reports that Natsume had been in hiding, moving with Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi, Takahiro, and Chizuru. Hence, Natsume's capture was also an opportunity to finish off the Tsuchimikado in one clean sweep.

"We should act immediately."

"This is an incredible opportunity. We'll be able to capture them if we put forth all the power of the Mystical Investigators."

"That being said, aren't they just hiding around Kichijoji? Their stealth magic is quite high-level; can we spot them?"

"Of course we have the help of the metropolitan police. The case of the fire at their main residence still hasn't been resolved. With their power, we should be able to investigate exactly where they've gone.

Takahiro of the three Tsuchimikados was a former Mystical Investigator. Since he was extremely familiar with the Mystical Investigators' tactics, attacking head-on ought to be more effective in this kind of situation than small tricks.

"If Yasuzumi-kun performs divination, he'll quickly learn about our movements. It's not a good idea to rely on outside power."

"That's why we need to resolve it today. The more time we take, the more likely it is that they'll know."

"It's the same. They've been able to continuously avoid the Mystical Investigators' search for the past year and a half. Why is that? We get noticed when we're getting close no matter how fast we are. No, that's not all, they notice as soon as we move ever so slightly. Though it's certainly good to act earlier, we can't capture them solely relying on speed."

Yashamaru smiled at his stern-faced ally. What Yashamaru said was certainly reasonable, but it was an indisputable premise that they couldn't just leave the Tsuchimikado alone. He said:

"They can't read the stars of shikigami. Let me do this. I finally have free time, so if I go look with Kumomaru the two of us should be able to do something."

"Then what about Dairenji Suzuka's monitoring?"

"The Tsuchimikado have a higher priority right now."

Yashamaru stood up from the sofa after speaking, strolling slowly like always. He smiled at Kurahashi.

"Then I'll leave the rest to you. I look forward to a successful report."

"The three of them didn't notice. Go get approval from the Mystical Investigators on standby as soon as you can."

Yashamaru contacted Kurahashi in the agency building from a place one block away from the Tsuchimikado hideout. Normally, divination could only read the stars and fates of humans. But reading the stars of shikigami was impossible. So Yasuzumi hadn't anticipated the surprise attack by the shikigami Yashamaru and Kumomaru. But not everything would go so smoothly.

"Hmm? Tsuchimikado Natsume escaped!?"

"It's more like she wasn't there to begin with. It seems like she's gone out."

"Then let's wait for her to come back."

"Wait? Unfortunately, the house is a bit destroyed and there are people gathered around. Do you think she'll just waltz on back?"

Their phones and computers had been destroyed in the magic battle. Ding the battle, Takahiro had skillfully destroyed their electronics instead of trying to escape. It had been a keen judgment to stop any leaks of information and to destroy any clues about Natsume. But that said, Natsume would have trouble escaping. Yashamaru immediately began a search for her. But...

"How about this, why don't we report the capture of the three Tsuchimikados and the fact that the underage girl traveling with them is currently a fugitive to the media? Can we make it as big as possible right away?"

"It's possible, but for what reason?"

"The reason we want Tsuchimikado Natsume is as bait to lure Tsuchimikado Harutora and 'Shadow'."

"Ah, so we use this news to draw out Harutora."

"Right, one clean sweep."

"Okay, I'll prepare immediately."

Yashamaru decided his strategy with Kurahashi and began a search for Natsume along with Kumomaru.

★

He wasn't confused.

After seeing that breaking news, Tenma returned to his room right away and opened the backpack in his closet.

It was a backpack he had prepared over a year ago. Inside was a change of clothes, cash, charms, and other necessities. He added the charms he had gotten from the 'workshop' today to it, completing his preparations for leaving home.

His attention turned to an apartment room farther away as he 'looked'. The Mystical Investigator shikigami staying there was still monitoring Tenma's actions, but nothing in particular had changed. Even with the news that had been broadcasted, his own surveillance system hadn't been modified.

But it was just temporary. As long as Natsume was still on the run, the surveillance on Tenma, her friend, would soon be strengthened. If he were to leave, he should take advantage of the present.

He didn't know how much use he could be.

But in the current situation, he needed to start moving first and think later. His other friends would think the same.

But there was still another line he had to draw.

Tenma paused for a while, changing back into the Onmyou Academy uniform he had taken off after coming back home.

He breathed deeply and walked out of his own room, entering the living room. His grandfather wasn't here. He peered into the kitchen and didn't see his grandmother's figure either. Strange.....

"Grandpa? Grandma?" Still, no response.

He tried the bedrooms, the bathroom, and the lavatory, but didn't spot his grandparents. Could they have secretly left? Feeling it suspicious, he pushed open the door to the guest room.

Surprise stopped his hands in midair.

His grandparents were sitting with their backs to the door in the center of the guest room. Also, his grandfather was wearing sokutai[5] and his mother had changed into miko garb. They seemed to have been waiting for Tenma - no, they had undoubtedly been waiting for Tenma.

They had realized. Tenma stood still in a daze upon noticing the situation. Then,

"Come sit down." His grandfather ordered without turning around.

Tenma could only comply. He listlessly sat down in seiza before his grandfather.

---

[5] A complex, historical attire worn by members of the imperial court. Rarely worn for modern occasions like weddings and ceremonies.

The expressions of his grandparents were more serious than ever before. They had even changed their clothes for this, just like what Tenma had been thinking.

His grandparents were still silent after he sat down. The two parties didn't even look straight at each other.

But even without words or gazes, the 'conversation' between grandparents and grandson continued. The conversation between grandson who was going to put himself in danger, and the grandparents who were unwilling to lose their grandson after losing their daughter.

The silence still held out. They were exchanging feelings right now rather than words. Their life together for these years allowed them to have this exchange between individuals who cared for each other.

"......You won't change your mind?" His grandfather finally opened his mouth after the long silence.

Tenma's hands tightened as they gripped his knees. He couldn't accept the emotion-laden voice.

Even so, Tenma's decision didn't budge.

"Sorry."

A slightly shaking, weak voice. He inadvertently wanted to laugh at himself.

He regulated his breathing again, raised his head, and said:

"Sorry. But please let me go."

He met his grandparents' gazes. His grandparents, who had raised their heads at some point, stared at him with penetrating and gentle gazes.

"Really." The same voice sounded again, and Tenma's heart constricted. "You can't win against that blood flowing through you."

"......Truly so." His grandmother murmured as well.

Then, his grandfather adjusted his seiza again, speaking as the Momoe family head:

"Tenma. From today, you're expelled from the household."

Tenma shuddered at the incomparably stern tone. But it wasn't fear. He wasn't afraid. That would be rude to his grandparents and to his own determination.

"Yes."

He replied, facing his grandfather.

A bit of pride mixed with his grandfather's severe expression as he looked at his grandson. Then,

"So..... don't worry about us. Go follow what you believe in."

Tenma stared.

His grandfather motioned for his grandmother to take out a small box, then opened it. Inside was a key.

"Take this with you. It's something your father left for you."

"My father?"

Tenma took the key, trying to 'look' at it. It didn't seem like a magical tool.

"Ask Tsuruta of the Witchcraft Corporation for details. He knows everything."

"Tsuruta!? W-Why?"

"He was the one who sent the key after your parents died. He contacted us by phone just now. He's waiting for you in the center of Waseda."

"How..... But!"

"Act according to your own will, and we will act according to our own wills." His grandfather smiled fearlessly. "No matter how much trouble those actions bring."

Tenma could say nothing back. He left the house, tightly holding the key.

★

"I'm off."

"Yeah, take care."

A brief goodbye. Kyouko and her grandmother Miyo both expected this goodbye.

Her grandmother couldn't endure a fugitive life with her physical strength from living under house arrest. Though Kyouko wanted to bring her grandmother, Miyo had firmly forbid her from doing so. Miyo was only able to send her off so resolutely because she realized that her current self couldn't do anything for her granddaughter. Kyouko wasn't willing to sully her grandmother's noble feelings either.

"Bye, Grandma."

"Bye."

After a light-hearted exchange, Kyouko left the residence behind her carrying a leather suitcase.

...Though they had hidden themselves in the bamboo patch deep within the residence, once she left - or more accurately, before she left - she noticed the auras hidden inside the courtyard.

They were the doormen working at the Kurahashi household. After all, that news had just been broadcasted, and she had went out with a suitcase late at night, so anyone would be feel alarmed. She had been too lax.

Kyouko didn't shrink back, heading to the main entrance with dignity. A doorman jumped out and stopped her.

"Kyouko-sama, please return to your room! Please!"

He was a servant who had taken care of her in her youth. The other two people with him also blocked Kyouko's path.

"Let me through."

"I cannot!"

"Really. Then..... Sorry."

Kyouko apologized as she took out a charm.

But the other two had already prepared spells before coming here, and were a step faster than Kyouko.

"Bind! Order!"

The two of them both threw out wood-element charms. They didn't want to harm Kyouko, so they tried to bind her while ensuring her safety. Kyouko let out a small wail and fell on the ground, with the suitcase dropping next to her.

The servant who had talked first hastily approached her, but.

"Wh-wh-what is this!?"

Snowflakes rose up from the Kyouko's vine-bound body and then it disappeared, only leaving behind a humanoid shikigami charm.

It was a simple shikigami.

"Damn. That's why she came out the main entrance!"

"The back door! This was bait, Kyouko-sama's trying to leave through the back door!" The servant shouted and the group ran into the residence.

Then, seeing that no one was left on the grounds, Kyouko emerged from the shadow of a bush where she had been stealthed and picked up the suitcase fallen on the ground.

She had made this simple shikigami hold the suitcase and draw their attention before leaving through the main entrance and waited to escape through the front door while they ran to the back door to pursue her.

Then, when she stepped out of the front entrance, the shikigami that had been positioned by the entrance monitoring Kyouko for the past year and a half appeared.

".....Honestly, did you think that would work?"

A beautiful, dangerous smile. Kyouko rapidly formed a hand seal. A seal worlds apart from the one the simple shikigami had used earlier.

"On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

Unmoving Golden Chains. Kyouko made a different hand seal right afterwards and hurled out a charm. "Order!"

The blue flame of the fire-element charm rapidly engulfed the shikigami. It was just an instantaneous action, but it might have drawn the attention of the doormen from before. Kyouko left another simple shikigami there as bait and left the entrance using stealth magic.

She was outside without being watched. Just that was enough to make Kyouko feel freedom like never before. But the real game was starting now. She searched for a pay phone first. Though there weren't many around here, Kyouko had made sure to check the locations of various pay phones. She hastily dashed to the

closest to the residence, picked up the receiver, put in coins, and dialed the number she had memorized beforehand.

There was only one person among her friends who hadn't changed his number. She had learned that he would be the first to move from her divination before.

The phone connected after two rings.

"Tenma!"

"Kyouko! Is it Kyouko? Where are you--"

Kyouko's heart warmed up upon hearing the familiar voice she hadn't heard since the year before last. "A phone outside my house. I know you're already out, Tenma. I'm the same. Can we meet up?"

"Kyouko, do you know where Natsume is?"

"Sorry, the divination wasn't successful..... But I do now the approximate area."

"Got it. Let's meet. Kyouko, you're near your house, right?'

"Yeah. Tenma, where are you? If possible, let's meet near Shinjuku--"

"It's alright, I'll go to you."

"Eh? But--"

"It's faster this way."

...Hmm?

Something was odd about the way Tenma spoke. But it was a race against time and she didn't know when the doormen would find her. She thought about the local terrain and told Tenma the location to meet.

Tenma arrived faster than Kyouko anticipated.

★

Suzuka only learned of the capture of Tsuchimikado Takahiro and the others thirty minutes after the report came out. Suzuka made her decision right there, hating the wasted half-hour.

Of course, this report itself might be a trap set by her father and Kurahashi to lure Harutora out. ...The more likely it was a trap, the more people they would send to help capture Harutora. In other words, the fighting power stationed at the Onmyou Agency would be mostly sent over there. She should take advantage of that and escape now!

Her destination was Kichijoji. After seeing the news from before, both friends and enemies would gather in Kichijoji. She had to go there now too.

A barrier had cut off the aura of the research lab from the outside, and she couldn't see whether Kumomaru was outside guarding. She definitely couldn't beat Kumomaru in a head-on fight, but the only advantage she had right now was that neither Kumomaru nor Yashamaru was willing to expose their true identities in front of normal employees. As long as she attracted enough attention, she couldn't need to fight all-out with Kumomaru, and then she could take the opportunity to run away. The other problematic Mystical

Investigators should have all gone to the scene of the incident, so there shouldn't be anyone to block her path...

...That's what she would do. In any case, thinking about it wouldn't do any good.

She took out charms, focusing her mind on presences outside, and opened the door to the research lab.

In the end,

"What!?"

...He wasn't there!?

Kumomaru's aura wasn't there. She 'looked' at the surrounding aura again, but as she thought, Kumomaru wasn't there.

"W-Why....." Was it coincidence..... No, impossible. It was definitely some kind of trap. But was there any need to set a trap for Suzuka, who was already confined?

...Ah, right, that's it!

It was because of Natsume. Suzuka was released from her surveillance because Kumomaru had probably been sent to Kichijoji. A few half-baked Mystical Investigators couldn't do anything to the Tsuchimikado family, but capturing Harutora would be much easier with the aid of a powerful shikigami like Kumomaru. How fortunate.

...This was her chance!

Suzuka activated stealth and ran to the exit. Stay calm, stay calm. Though she wanted to run with all her might, the key right now was to maintain her stealth and stay hidden. She went down to the first floor. She ran to the entrance that workers used for deliveries instead of the main entrance. She passed by several employees on the way, but the abilities of a normal employee couldn't see through the stealth of the Child Prodigy Dairenji Suzuka.

Escaping out of the back door, Suzuka stood on the nighttime road lit by streetlights. She ran past a few roads and unconsciously stopped when she could no longer see the Onmyou Agency.

She took a deep breath.

I've escaped the Onmyou Agency.

...Have I escaped?

She wondered whether it was a trap again. It still didn't feel real to her. Suzuka was startled by freedom she hadn't had in a long time.

...No, no, it's not the time to space out. I have to hurry over to Natsume!

The fact that Yashamaru and Kumomaru were able to ignore Suzuka and head over there meant that the situation was extremely critical.

Could she still use her credit card? She had some cash on her, but she didn't know whether it was enough for a taxi to Kichijoji. Would it be faster to take the train? Right, since it was already dark, she might as well just fly there with a shikigami!

Suzuka took out her tome-shaped magical tool and was about to summon one of her proud paper shikigami, when--

"Don't move."

She had been careless.

Barriers blocked her off in front, behind, to her left and right, and above.

"......It's been a while, Dairenji."

"Y-Yuge Mari!?"

An Independent Exorcist wearing miasma protection clothing came up from behind. The 'Barrier Princess' Yuge Mari of the Twelve Divine Generals. Though Suzuka knew her face, they had almost never spoken.

"Damn....."

She had gotten careless since Kumomaru hadn't been there. She should have known that no matter how critical the Kichijoji situation was, they wouldn't just let her go when she had information about the third spiritual disaster terrorist attack coming up on Hinamatsuri. She was too naive. She was so remorseful she wanted to cry.

"......Dairenji, I know you're friends with Tsuchimikado Natsume, and I can understand your feelings." A businesslike tone. "Don't resist and obediently return to the Onmyou Agency."

"Shut up! You don't understand anything, so don't look like you know it all!"

Yuge was surprised by her sudden malice. They had never been well acquainted, and Yuge still held on to Suzuka's image as the Onmyou Agency's poster girl.

"Okay, okay. I don't really understand your situation. It's just business."

"Have you never thought about whether the person giving your orders was right or not!?"

"As a member of an organization, my duty is to follow orders. If everyone did whatever they wanted, it wouldn't be an organization."

"That's what the people above you want you to think! They're all doing whatever they want!"

"Even so, those are the rules. I'll say it again, don't resist and cooperate with me--"

"Hmph! Who'd listen to you, you old hag!"

"Old--"

Yuge was speechless for a while, then pouted in anger. "Hey, why can't you speak a bit more politely--"

"Honestly. Suzuka, you shouldn't have said that just now."

A voice suddenly came from behind her. Yuge spun around to look.

A sturdy-looking boy - no, a young man - was behind her, looking at Yuge with a challenging gaze.

"But what's up with an exorcist making a surprise attack like a Mystical Investigator? Be more like an exorcist. Why don't you fight this 'oni' instead of bullying that brat over there?"

As he proclaimed this, Touji took off the bandanna from his forehead.

★

Natsume was running away on her own. Touji had prepared to move to where Natsume was after learning that.

As the one who had it the easiest among his friends, he undoubtedly had the duty to meet Natsume first. He didn't know where Harutora was, so he was the only one who could help Natsume.

"Wait." Amami stopped him. "This is a trap. It wouldn't have gotten on the news so fast unless they deliberately released the information."

"Is it fake information?"

"No. The contents are real, but Kichijoji is definitely full of Onmyou Agency men right now."

"That's no concern. I just need to find Natsume before those guys do."

"I told you to wait, I didn't tell you not to go. They're trying to lure us out, but they don't know where we are or when we'll appear."

"......In other words?"

"It's an ambush."

"Then I need to go win quickly. Now's the time for blitzkrieg."

"That would be if we were alone."

Touji suddenly reacted. "......What do you mean?'

"Go to the Akihabara Onmyou Agency building and meet up with Suzuka. Get her out if possible."

An unexpected instruction. All kind of surprising tactics would always show up at Amami Daizen's hands.

"......Can I hear the reasons?"

"None of your friends, including Suzuka, will just sit still after seeing this news. Suzuka will have the most trouble moving around in this situation."

"So you mean I should go give her a helping hand?"

Amami nodded. "Takahiro of the branch family has the power of divination, so he wouldn't be caught by the Mystical Investigators that easily. In other words, they were caught by something other than the Mystical Investigators, something that could avoid divination.

Something that could avoid divination.....!

"Yase Doji."

"Right. Divination is ineffective on shikigami. In other words, Yashamaru and Kumomaru aren't at the agency building, they're capturing Takahiro and the others. We should gratefully take advantage of such a good opportunity."

Then, when Touji came to the Onmyou Agency as per Amami's instructions, he happened to see a barrier on the road--

"Speaking of which, I didn't hear anything about a Divine General being here while the Yase Doji were away."

Suzuka and the Independent Exorcist, 'Binding Princess' Yuge Mari. Their conversation didn't look very friendly.

...Well, it was good that he hadn't passed them by.

"Touji!?" Suzuka cried out in surprise from inside the barriers.

"Touji..... You're Ato Touji!?"

Yuge took a fighting stance. It looked like information on Touji had reached the Exorcist Bureau.

"I'm quite honored that a Divine General remembers the name of a mere former student." Teasingly, Touji started gathering his body's magical energy.

"Suzuka, how much time to get through?"

Suzuka and Yuge instantly understood what Touji meant.

"Five - No, four minutes!"

"Do it in two." Touji said and charge at Yuge in a flash.

But Yuge coldly said ".....Are you serious?", using Unmoving Golden Chains without any warning. Touji also tossed out a protective charm to counter it and dodged to the side.

The Golden Chains bound the magical wall from the protective charm he threw out along with the entire space behind him. If he hadn't avoided that just now, it would have been over right away.

...I have to buy time against this opponent.....!?

"Did you say you wanted to fight me?"

"Yes, please."

"Stop. You'll just hurt yourself."

"If I'm just gonna get hurt a bit, that's a great deal!"

He ran forward again, and:

"First seal, release!"

Armor of demonic aura formed all over Touji's body. It had been a long time since he released the seal outside of training. A sense of release fueled Touji's fighting spirit.

But Yuge's expression didn't change. She just formed a hand seal and crated countless restricting barriers in front of her. It looked like she already knew Touji's name and understood that he was a living spirit.

Touji dodged as best he could with his living spirit reflexes. It would be over if he ran into a single barrier.

Suzuka cried "Touji!" with a wail, but Touji roared without looking at her:

"Still one minute thirty seconds left!"

He desperately dodged. He wasn't just relying on his reactions, it was more of predicting them beforehand by 'seeing' the flow of aura. He told himself that he couldn't possibly lose to this kind of opponent if he wanted to be capable of fighting Kagami. In any case, he dodged with all his might.

On the other hand, Yuge's expression changed slightly. Suddenly, she lifted a hand above her head and unleashed magical energy in a flash, forming a huge barrier that covered the entire road.

"What!?"

He was in range. Touji felt the burden of magical energy from the barrier and his movements slowed down.

"Ugh!?"

The barrier shrank to the approximate size of a person, tightly confining Touji.

...As expected.....

The name 'Binding Princess' was no exaggeration. She wasn't the same type as Kagami, but her strength was undoubtedly deserving of the Divine General title. There was still one minute. He had originally wanted to hold out for another thirty seconds, but as expected, this was an enemy he couldn't hold back against.

"Third seal, release!"

The malicious demonic aura that poured forth blew away the Divine General's barrier from the inside.

"What--"

Yuge and Suzuka were all stunned.

With horns on his forehead, crimson flames of demonic aura, and protruding fangs, Touji shot towards Yuge like an arrow.

When Yuge reflexively put up a barrier, it twisted from the sheer brute force. Stunned, Yuge retreated a step. Touji advanced to pursue, giving her no room to relax.

The pale Yuge put up one magical wall after another, but Touji completely shattered them all. Though it reduced Touji's speed, it also meant she had no time to retreat and put distance between them, so he closed in on her step by step. Offensive power was the biggest weapon that Touji possessed when he controlled the oni.

"You - what is this!?"

"Who knows!? Go ask your friend the Chief for details!"

With a crash, Yuge deflected Touji but was sent flying herself, colliding with the building behind her.

Touji didn't pursue when she saw Yuge pull away, and retreated instead.

Yuge suddenly became conscious about what was going on.

"...Two minutes!"

Suzuka undid Yuge's barrier. Touji picked Suzuka up and escaped the area with all his power.

"Damn!"

Yuge hastily pursued, but the physical abilities of the unsealed Touji were more like a shikigami's than a human's, and he leaped onto a streetlight and jumped onto the roof of a building. Yuge formed a seal to stop him with a barrier, but:

"Order!"

Suzuka's shikigami nullified the barrier. Yuge clicked her tongue as she watched the figures of Touji and Suzuka vanish on the other side of the building.

One minute later, Touji shook Yuge off his tail completely and sealed his demonic aura again.

Natsume continued to flee.

Mystical Investigators were constantly watching the station. She moved some distance away with Akino's help.

"What should I do?"

Natsume's head was blank and she couldn't think of what to do. She had difficulty looking straight and her feet didn't seem to feel the ground as she walked. Her attention slipped for a moment and she fell to the ground, her feet losing their strength. In the past, Harutora, Touji, and her friends had been with her and the adults of the Onmyou Academy would have protected her, but now Natsume was alone without anyone to rely on.

"What should I do?"

Yasuzumi, Takahiro, and Chizuru had all been captured by the Onmyou Agency men, and although she had to go help them, she couldn't think of a way to do that. Also, the Onmyou Agency men ought to be searching for the Natsume with all their power. It would be too dangerous to act recklessly, so all she could do now was run away. But how side was the enemy's reach? She ought to hide herself immediately. The farther she could run away, the better. But what should she do after that?

"What should I do? What should I do?"

Natsume's gaze became blurry and her ears rumbled. Her breathing became difficult and her body became heavy.

"What should I do after this?"

Suddenly, someone grabbed her hand and shouted.

"Natsume!!!"

Natsume came to her senses and saw Akino's worried look.

"Natsume, are you alright?"

"...I'm alright."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm actually alright. I'm running away now, so don't worry, Akino."

"No. I'm worried about whether you're alright or not! You've been walking around in a daze. Where are you going to go? Anyway, you should calm down a bit!"

Akino was right. Natsume looked at Akino and nodded. Natsume closed her eyes, controlled her breathing, and calmed down.

"Sorry for making you worry."

"It's alright. Um, the adults got caught. We're probably being tracked down too."

"Yeah, that's right."

"Oh, right. Can't we go to the person who you gave the letter to, that Momoe Tenma? Or if not, what about Kyouko? That girl should be okay with it. It's an emergency, after all. The letter she gave you before seemed really friendly. That letter from before seemed really friendly, right? She'd be worried about you if she saw the news, so we can rely on her, right?"

"No. We'd trouble their families. People from the Onmyou Agency would monitor them; it's too dangerous."

"But didn't the letter say that they would help you if you fell in trouble? They'd be very sad if you got caught."

Though Natsume reflexively rejected Akino's serious proposal, her heart was extremely mixed. But right now both Natsume and Akino clearly had no options.

"......I can't do that."

Akino looked tensely at Natsume. Natsume's figure was reflected in her eyes. Suddenly, inadvertently, it seemed as if she heard someone else's voice.

'Be brave, rely on us!' Right! Harutora! There was still Harutora!

But just then.....

"So here's where you were."

Natsume jumped in surprise and looked over. Behind Akino stood a young aristocratic man. But neither Natsume nor Akino had released their stealth, and normally, she would have noticed if someone approached.

"We hit the jackpot today. Nice to meet you. After all, you were already dead when you saw me before. I'm Yashamaru. Sorry to bother, Tsuchimikado Natsume."

Natsume's eyes widened in shock. "Yase Doji!? How???"

Akino looked at Yashamaru, her body trembling. But Natsume mustered her courage when she saw the timid Akino.

"My stepfather....."

"Hmm?"

"Is Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi alright?"

"Oh, he's alright, he's still alive."

"You....."

Natsume became angry, but Yashamaru smiled.

"Surrender."

Just then, a young man appeared behind Yashamaru. A diligent man, contrasting with Yashamaru's laid-back appearance. She had met him before - he was one of Takiko's Yase Doji.

"Didn't you say before that you weren't going to hurt them?"

"What, Kumomaru, don't just show yourself like that."

"There are more important things right now."

Natsume drew their attention as she asked;

"Is Takiko here?"

"No, she's training. Also, this time was my own decision."

"....."

"As I thought, you still hate her, huh. Don't force yourself."

Natsume didn't reply to Yashamaru. She held extremely strong, complex emotions towards Takiko.

"Alright, then."

Though Natsume was nervous, she let go of everything. All she could do was take the plunge with this crisis before her.

"First seal, release!"

Natsume called out and released the seal on her own. Immediately, her body filled with yin aura. This was the borrowed aura of the spiritual beast Hokuto - draconic aura. Yashamaru's and Kumomaru's expressions abruptly changed upon seeing this.

"Noumaku sanmanda botanan indoraya sowaka!"

Natsume chanted the mantra of Indra, the god of lightning. By the law of Five Elements Mutual Generation, it instantly turned into lightning aura. Lightning split the night sky and gave off a blinding light. Lightning magic. Yashamaru blocked most of the attack with a magical wall, and Kumomaru dodged.

"Now!"

Natsume suddenly picked up Akino and leaped, jumping into the sky. The draconic aura under her feet danced, flying into the air. This was a flying ability using the power of the dragon Hokuto.

"Oh, not bad. As expected of the Tsuchimikado's guardian beast."

Yashamaru and Kumomaru kept pursuing, jumping and rolling along rooftops.

"A dragon living spirit, how interesting. But don't get too excited."

Yashamaru and Kumomaru calmly chased after Natsume as she flew through the sky. But when she was using draconic aura, she couldn't use stealth.

Just then, a dozen swallows blocked Natsume's path. Also, they circled in midair and attacked Natsume continuously without letting up.

"In that case..."

Natsume stopped releasing her draconic aura, losing her ability to fly in midair and falling to the ground. The group of swallows chased after them, and when the swallows gathered together, chanted "Order!" and unleashed a charm. The wood-element charm she used drew in the electricity like a lightning rod, shocking the swallows and shooting off sparks in the night sky. That single strike defeated the group of swallows.

"On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

But Kumomaru used Unmoving Golden Chains, and Natsume and Akino were both bound up. Natsume used draconic aura again, releasing lightning from all over her body and breaking apart the magical net. It had completely transitioned into a midair battle, and Natsume's Hokuto power was almost used up. Seeing Natsume almost at her limits, Kumomaru moved in front of Natsume and shouted:

"Give up, you won't last!"

And following that: "Right, Rabbit?"

Shocked, Natsume looked at Akino in her arms. The ears and tail that she normally concealed were materialized.

"How surprising." Yashamaru, who suddenly came down from the night sky above, looked at Akino and said:

"Could it be... No... How could she be here... This girl..... is a Souma? It's getting more and more interesting."

"Chief?"

"Kumomaru, wrap it up."

Yashamaru formed a Rakshasa seal and a black fog was generated in the night sky. Natsume immediately unleashed lightning, but it was completely ineffective. After Yashamaru's instruction, Kumomaru began attacking without mercy. The two of them cooperated and generated a huge magical energy, crushing Natsume. As Natsume took the impact all over her body, Akino dropped from her arms.

"Ah, Akino!"

Natsume did her best to grab Akino with her hand. Akino shouted again and the two of them fell from the sky. Just then, Yashamaru released the second wave. Natsume was hit again.

"It would be bad if you died." The moment Natsume was about to hit the ground, Yashamaru bound her up with Unmoving Golden Chains.

Natsume's vision went black. A raven seemed to cut across her blurred vision.

Chapter 4 - Meteor Flurry

The event had been anticipated.

But,

"......Impressive. What a debut."

Yashamaru murmured to himself, descending from the night sky down to the road. Kumomaru followed right behind him.

He didn't need to turn around to sense that Kumomaru next to him was somewhat tense. It wasn't without reason. After all, 'he' who currently stood in front of them couldn't be spoken of the same way as one and a half years ago.

On an overpass, Harutora held the still-unconscious Natsume who was bound by Yashamaru's Unmoving Golden Chains.

Surrounding them on the other side of the overpass was the figure of Kakugyouki, holding the rabbit living spirit girl in one arm.

They had been a step away from getting their hands on Natsume and the girl, but Yashamaru was more curious and excited than upset. The Onmyouji Dairenji Shidou who had abandoned his human body had dedicated his life to research on 'him'.

'He' who had been born in chaotic times and who had established a huge system of magic amidst the swirling fires of war - the great Onmyouji Tsuchimikado Yakou.

They had met before, while he had been working for his master. He had been trying to steal back the same Natsume who was collapsed behind him, and hadn't even spoken.

But this time was different. There was already a camouflaging barrier set up around them, and no one would come disturb them.

Suppressing the excitement in his chest, Yashamaru righted his posture and greeted him.

"North Star King."

He noticed a momentary tremor from Kumomaru behind him. Mutobe Chihiro was also an Onmyouji fascinated with Yakou.

"It's been a long time, and I deeply apologize for being unable to greet you properly before. It's an incredible pleasure that you've successfully awakened. I am fortunate for the opportunity to meet with a great historical pioneer of magic, it truly is--"

"Quiet."

Yashamaru's lips twisted at that word and the words in his throat were stopped right there.

Harutora gazed at Yashamaru with his right eye. He had been hit. First-class spirit language. Though he had showed an opening just now, it was incredible that he had been able to shut his mouth so precisely.

He waved a hand to tell Kumomaru taking a stance behind him not to act rashly.

...A bitter lesson.

He had been struck without hesitation. But anger, bitterness, and displeasure didn't fill his heart. After all, it was obvious retribution for setting bait and doing such rude things to the reincarnation of that great Yakou. You could even say that he wanted the rare experience of taking one of the North Star King's moves directly.

...Exactly what I've been looking for.

That was how special the existence Tsuchimikado Yakou was to someone captivated with the abyss of magic. Even to someone as old and experienced as he.

The Onmyouji who had mastered all the magic in the world and fearlessly stepped into the deepest taboos half a century ago.

That said, Yashamaru greatly respected this Onmyouji named Tsuchimikado Yakou, but didn't worship him. His praise was just respectful courtesy.

He stopped Kumomaru and released the first-class spirit language cast on his body, forming his hand seal slowly as if to tell the other party that he wasn't doing anything reckless. Then he lowered his head and bowed again.

"My apologies. Please forgive my discourtesy, but my praise for you is no falsehood. I am sincerely happy for your return as the former leader of the Souma. .....Even if you are on a different side now."

"....."

Harutora's face was stony. He didn't react to Yashamaru's words, but a response came from an unexpected direction.

"Eh!? Souma? Did you just say Souma!?"

The living spirit girl that Kakugyouki was protecting cried out and then hastily shut her mouth.

But her wide-eyed expression of disbelief could still be seen.

As expected, Souma blood also ran through this girl's body. And the Tsuchimikado didn't seem to have investigated it much.

"Hey, stand up."

Yashamaru released the girl. If you didn't count the rabbit ears sprouting from her head, the swaying girl didn't even reach the chest of her protector next to her. She looked confusedly between Kakugyouki and Harutora.

"U-U-Um, I'm Natsume's friend, I just ran away with N-Natsume, so, well, I, um.....!?"

Seeing that incoherent expression told them that she didn't understand who the protector next to her was. No, it was likely that she truly didn't understand anything at all. But that was why she had been able to escape the Souma intelligence network so successfully.

Harutora held Natsume and approached the flustered Natsume, the hem of his Raven's Wing fluttering.

"Hi, what's your name?"

A simple tone. I see. Yashamaru's eyes brightened.

"Eh? .....Ah, S-Souma Akino. .....B-But I don't have any relationship with the other Souma over there, okay? ...N-No, I'm really not related! It's my first time seeing him--"

"I know. So you're Akino? You said you were Natsume's friend?"

"Y-Yeah. Definitely, I'm not lying--"

"I said I know. It was a bit of a surprise."

"Eh?"

"She wouldn't even imagine taking the initiative to make friends before. Akino, I don't know how you see it, but that girl was incredibly antisocial before." Harutora smiled cheerfully as he spoke.

Yashamaru quietly and carefully observed Harutora's appearance.

Yashamaru himself had been resurrected as a shikigami, but it was different from 'reincarnation'. 'Who' the current Tsuchimikado Harutora was posed an extremely important point for Yashamaru and Kurahashi.

Oblivious to what Yashamaru was thinking, Harutora continued speaking with the straightforward Akino:

"Akino. I have to ask you for a favor. Can you carry Natsume away from this place while my shikigami clears the way for you?"

"Eh, you want m-me!?"

"I'm asking this of you because you're Natsume's friend."

"B-But....."

After hesitating for a while, Akino clenched her fists in front of her chest, replying resolutely to Harutora:

"Y-You're Natsume's childhood friend, right? Natsume's always..... always been looking for you! You finally met, but....."

"......Yeah. I know. But I still need to ask this of you."

He said in a firm tone.

It was a firmness that was hard to reject, as well as a firmness that wouldn't budge in the face of adversity and would only continue struggling forward. The rebuttal that reached Akino's mouth vanished like smoke.

"Chief....." Kumomaru, who had been silently watching the situation unfold, quietly urged Yashamaru. But:

"...Don't worry." Yashamaru dispelled Kumomaru's suspense.

"......It's just the two of them. It's not too late to take care of things later. Kurahashi ought to have plans too. Right now we need to pay attention to Tsuchimikado Harutora."

According to the conversation, Harutora seemed to want to stay here. Though Yashamaru didn't know what his plans were, it was a good thing for them. More importantly, recklessly stopping Akino from escaping was quite dangerous with Kakugyouki here.

And most important of all.....

Their preparations weren't done yet. They just needed to quietly watch for changes.

Akino thought for a while and then put Natsume on her back.

"Can you carry her?"

"N-No problem!"

"As expected of a living spirit, you're stronger than you look. I almost can't hold on anymore..... Ah, right. Keep this matter a secret from Natsume when she wakes up. ...I'm counting on you, 'Full Moon'."

As he had thought. Yashamaru narrowed his eyes as if his prediction had hit the mark.

After glancing cautiously in the direction of Yashamaru and Kumomaru, and then nodding to Harutora, Akino ran out to the road carrying the unconscious Natsume.

She was just running on the ground, but she vanished in the blink of an eye. Quite an astounding speed. No wonder Harutora had asked her.

Then--

Finally, Harutora turned his head back over to Yashamaru.

Harutora and Kakugyouki confronted Yashamaru and Kumomaru on the narrow overpass road. The boy's eye stared straight at the two Yase Doji.

Quite intimidating. Just as Yashamaru was thinking about what to do next--

"...Hishamaru!"

Harutora suddenly barked.

A woman in a military outfit with fox ears and a tail appeared in front of Harutora with a disappointed tone. She was Hishamaru, who along with Kakugyouki composed 'Yakou's two guardians'.

"Stand down."

"But..."

"Hishamaru."

"......Yes!"

She quickly moved back behind Harutora and took a stance.

She hadn't left after checking on the Onmyou Agency men, but had approached them while under stealth. Perhaps she had been preparing for a sneak attack.

Of course, Yashamaru and Kumomaru weren't so careless that they would let such a sneak attack work, but Hishamaru seemed a bit strange indeed.

...Her aura wasn't stable?

When she had fought with Hishamaru at the Exorcist Bureau before, she had just released her seal and her aura had been extremely chaotic. But now, her aura was more 'unstable' than chaotic.

...Was that why he stopped her from sneak attacking?

In any case, the actors were now all present.

He wanted to first say something if possible, but the strange atmosphere didn't seem to be giving him the room to open his mouth.

"......Are the Souma trying to make the same mistake?"

Harutora broke the silence first. And he entered the main topic right away. Slightly unexpected, but that was just the development Yashamaru desired.

"That's a misunderstanding. North Star King, you should understand that it's all a misunderstanding."

"Quit it."

"What are you referring to?"

"That manner of speaking. You didn't talk like that at all the last time we met. There's nothing venerable about me."

"Have you forgotten? The one before you right now is the leader of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, you know? The leader of that Twin-Syndicate formed of fanatics chasing after Yakou's footsteps?"

Harutora listened with a resentful look. He was incredibly disliked.

"But..... alright. Since you say so, I'll stop speaking respectfully. But my respect for you is the real thing, you know? It wouldn't be too much to call it an obsession."

"Lying again, huh."

"No way. I just admire your heroics from your previous life. Establishing magic that none would speak ill about in the future using scientific techniques was an unprecedented feat! National funding, military support,

a supply of talent..... you had as much as you wanted. What greater joy can there be for a practitioner? You brought about a golden age of magic."

"....."

"Haha, don't look so bitter. Are you embarrassed?"

He still didn't respond. Yashamaru continued speaking his mind:

"If I could realize any one desire, it would be to live in the same era as you and feel that excitement with my own body. Gathering all the magics of Japan, analyzing them all, modifying, and melding them into a complete system. It's like creating a world to an Onmyouji - no, it's a great revolution of 'reincarnating' a world! What fortune it would be to be part of that revolution. I truly admire you."

Anyone delving into the road of Onmyou would think this, not just Yashamaru. To embrace a common vision and single-mindedly write a chapter of history.

The private Yakou Academy had been one of his creations.

Tsuchimikado Yakou had been the savior of the endangered magic community. Though there were naysayers, those naysayers had also been unconsciously helping along the downfall of magic.

But Yakou hadn't stopped at revitalizing magic. He had stepped further along and broken through taboos, delving into the marrow of magic. Until.....

".....Indeed, you failed that time."

Yashamaru spoke emotionlessly.

"But you can't call that a 'mistake'. Why would you use a sad term like 'mistake'? If you fail, just challenge it again. However many times it takes. Until you succeed."

".....Causing huge spiritual disasters in Tokyo again is alright for the sake of that success?"

"Of course."

He already knew what Harutora was scared of.

"Since ancient times, only a small number of humans have had the ability to 'see' aura. Why is that? It's so that they are 'able to see'. So that they can see that others 'cannot see'. Even if you must sacrifice something, you must look at the greater picture to contribute to humankind. That is our mission, although often people cannot see this."

...I'm not being straightforward enough.

"You failed that time."

Yashamaru repeated.

"But we're very thankful for that failure, you know? Now that we have that lesson, we'll succeed this time. We'd be able to fulfill any request you have if you were to give us your help."

He was walking on the road that Yakou had cleared. It would be terribly exciting to continue walking forward with him.

Tsuchimikado Harutora wouldn't do. Harutora, who was far removed from magic and who had grown up with the values of modern society, couldn't do it.

But Tsuchimikado Yakou was different.

"Since you regret your failure, come help us succeed. Isn't that why you reincarnated? Wasn't it to complete your mission?"

"......I see. So Yakou had this group of believers. There are these kinds of people, in addition to second-class magic."

"Please, please. You weren't like this in the past."

"......Just as you say, practitioners probably exist to 'see'."

Yashamaru's heart leaped when he heard 'his' reply.

However,

"But Onmyouji exist to use their 'seeing' abilities to maintain the balance of yin and yang."

Hmph. Yashamaru's mouth twisted unconsciously.

"Why must you be constrained by this? You're the one who expanded the scope of Onmyou to where it is now."

"Even so, the role of the Onmyouji does not change. I admit that there were times when I became too passionate and deviated from that role. But don't point to me to justify your current actions."

"Don't you want to know the spiritual composition of the world? Don't you want to test the possibilities of magic!? You don't want to open the door to a new world with your own hands!?"

Yashamaru straightened himself and shouted. His aura rose like an aureole of light, his eyes burning like fire.

But Harutora looked back with a sedate gaze.

Silence.

Silently, the spiritual pressure between the two of them increased.

Finally, Yashamaru withdrew first.

"Desire..... huh. I can't deny it, but at least call it a 'noble desire'. The noble desire that the Souma clan has wanted to realize for a thousand years. ...Alright, I understand. I didn't have much hope in getting you to accept it. I'm a bit regretful, but there's no other way around it."

Actually, now came the important part. Yashamaru regained his self-confident smile.

"So..... Let's venture into the next topic. How to take care of this current situation."

Kumomaru quickly took a stance, and Hishamaru and Kakugyouki prepared to engage accordingly.

An unstable atmosphere hung over the night road.

The two dead knights, one alluring fox spirit, a one-armed oni, and a black-clothed Onmyouji.

A modern Hyakki Yagyou[6].

"Let me repeat that I don't recognize you. I'll put out the fires that I started once before."

Harutora's eye closed, and instantly, the Raven's Wing swept forward, followed closely by the two shikigami attacking from the left and right.

Hishamaru went for Yashamaru, and Kakugyouki went for Kumomaru.

[6] Parade of a hundred demons.

In the next second,

"Ugh!" "Hah!"

Blows were exchanged. The four wove a typhoon of fist and feet.

The spell that solidified a shikigami's body with every punch and kick was 'magic' on its own. The most effective means for someone who single-mindedly wanted to defeat the enemy.

"Isn't it no fun to make it a physical battle right at the start?"

"Spare the jokes, dishonorable undead!"

Another fierce scuffle. In a physical battle, shikigami clashed with aura and sentiment. Kumomaru was falling into trouble as he fought with the one-armed oni who was spiritually the strongest present.

"I'm only using one arm over here, you know? Or do I need to hold back some more, hmm?"

Kumomaru was already powerless to do anything but defend. He had no chance of winning a physical battle.

Usually, a few mere shikigami were nothing before the power of a Yase Doji.

But her master currently wasn't with them.

Resurrection as a 'defensive shikigami' meant that they were unable to use their full power when their master wasn't present. Takiko hadn't approved Yashamaru's and Kumomaru's current actions; they were acting independently. They couldn't get any support in this place that their master couldn't sense.

Without the support of his magic, Kumomaru might not be able to suppress Kakugyouki alone--

"Don't look elsewhere during battle!"

He kicked back to dodge Hishamaru's attack. With that kick, he pulled away far enough to use magic.

"On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

He chanted repeatedly and formed eight Unmoving Golden Chains, shooting them at Hishamaru like a shotgun. Just as she was about to tear through the bindings by force,

"Argh!?"

An intense shock.

He had aimed at Hishamaru's unstable aura and deliberately strengthened the strength of the internal binding instead of the external.

As expected, Hishamaru couldn't use her full power. The reasons were unclear, but it was a great opportunity for them.

"Kumomaru, come help me--"

Just as the words left his mouth, Yashamaru was engulfed by a lotus of red flame appearing out of thin air and struck down to the ground.

Fire Realm magic. A merciless strike just like the first-class spirit language from before.

"Seems like you want to hold out until the Independent Officers come, but we don't have that kind of time, you know?" Harutora spoke loftily, the hem of his black clothes fluttering lightly.

His strategy to buy time had been exposed. Just by taking those two attacks, Yashamaru already had a deep feel for Harutora's fighting style. He didn't blindly show his strength, he just struck decisively at the most opportune time. 'Practical strength', like the strength of his old friend Kurahashi Genji.

But,

".....Well, buying time ends here. It looks like they already just got here."

Yashamaru spoke as he righted himself. Harutora realized something was wrong, his single eye showing his alarm - unfortunately, it was one step too late.

"You don't mind if I say a bit more, right? There were twenty total Swallow Whips that I let out a while back, and you brought down fourteen of them. One of the remaining ones made it back already..... Kumomaru!"

Kumomaru stopped fighting and retreated backwards in a flash. The five Swallow Whips present responded to the signal and hovered in the sky above, drawing out give lines of magical energy.

The lines of magical energy crossed, and what appeared was a giant magic seal - a pentagram.

"Ugh! Hishamaru, Kakugyouki, return!"

Just as the words left his mouth, a powerful magic crushed down on Harutora like a waterfall.

The Yamantaka method of the Vajrayana system of magic.

"Damn, this strength.....! Kakugyouki, help me!"

Harutora had trouble resisting and hastily summoned his defensive shikigami for aid. But the magic bursting forth held Harutora perfectly captive and wasn't that easy to break through.

Yashamaru took his hands out of his pockets and said calmly,

"I'm proud to welcome the 'Fire Demon', Independent Officer Miyachi - the most powerful long-range magic user of this generation. Enjoy."

★

A familiar sensation.

The feeling of being held. "Natsume, Natsume", sounded her childhood friend from next to her ear.

Her memories from her past life, secret memories from years ago that she had worked up the courage to say. Slightly-sweet memories that had gnawed at her in the lonely void of death.

If she slept like this, she wouldn't need to return to painful, bitter places.

If she slept deeply like this in warm arms.

As she thought this, she was reached by an unexpected shout.

...Don't give up.

Where did the voice come from.....?

...Go, do your best.

Why? I'm already so hurt, so why do you want me to keep going?

...If you don't keep going, you'll definitely regret it. A regret that you'll never be able to forget.

Natsume suddenly awoke from her slumber and ran towards the source of that voice.

Returning to that world with only despair and frustration no matter how hard she worked.

The voice continued to reach her.

...You realized long ago what it was you were actually chasing after.

...So you'll definitely keep going until the end.

Yeah. What Natsume was chasing after was still in that world. It wasn't in this gentle darkness, but was in that pain-filled world instead.

There was a soft feeling gently wrapping around her.

It was.....

★

.....Eh?

The first thing she felt was a fierce floating feeling. Wind howled by her ears.

"Eh?"

She opened her eyes. The scenery was rapidly receding.

Then soft hair brushed across her cheek - a rabbit ear.

"Eh!? Ah, Akino!"

She was passing by pedestrians, vehicles, and traffic lights on the night road at an extremely abnormal speed.

"Wait, hey, Akino!"

Akino didn't ease up on her speed. Rather, she accelerated. She stepped on a mailbox by the side of the road, and leaped with that momentum--

...N-No way!?

Carrying Natsume, Akino leaped across the busy road. The sound of wind, the impact of landing, and the blunt force from Akino's feet combined to make Natsume wake up completely.

"Hey, Akino! Akino!!"

"Eh? Ah, Natsume, you're awake."

"Y-Yeah. First let me down....."

Akino hastily put Natsume down.

She looked around. They were surrounded by tall buildings that weren't residential. Fortunately, no one had noticed Akino's reckless way of crossing the road.

She breathed deeply.

It looked like there were no dangers around right now. But how?

"Akino, what happened to the Yase Doji? What happened afterwards?"

She clearly remembered being defeated by Yashamaru and losing consciousness as she and Akino fell from the sky.

Of course, Yashamaru wouldn't have just let her die of falling there, but it was impossible that he would have let Akino run away with her. Akino couldn't possibly have the strength to escape those two either. So then--

"Natsume, your childhood friend saved you!"

"Eh?"

"It was that... Yeah, that guy called Harutora!"

.....

She thought of it. The black wing that had flashed before her eyes the moment before she lost consciousness had given her a nostalgic sensation.

"So it was Harutora-kun....."

"Yeah! He told me to carry you away, and then--"

...Harutora-kun.....!

"Where is he!? Where is he now!?"

"Ehh? H-He's back over there..... Wait, Natsume!"

She hastily grabbed Natsume as she tried to run back.

"Let me go! Harutora-kun's over there, right!? I finally met him again!"

"E-Even if you say that!"

Rationally, she knew that she wouldn't be any help now that the draconic aura was already almost depleted, but her body unconsciously rushed over when she heard that Harutora was there.

Unsure what to do, Akino stared at Natsume as she tightly bit her lip and trembled.

Harutora had let her escape. He definitely had his own reasons. She would just be a hindrance if she recklessly went back right now.

.....She knew that.

"S-Should we really go back and take a look? Maybe it'll be okay from a distance....."

Akino timidly acquiesced to Natsume.

She inadvertently put on a wry smile. Even though it was a smile with a trace of sadness, at least she had relaxed a bit.

"......Thanks."

Natsume thanked her straightforwardly.

"But never mind. Even if I went back right now, I wouldn't be able to do anything for Harutora....."

She couldn't do anything for Harutora.

Though she said it herself, it stung her heart.

She had hidden herself, run away, and worked hard until now, but still ended up like this. How comical. How pathetic. Even she felt it miserable. She wanted to cry.

That being the case.....

...That was why she was able to continue on.

"......Akino, along the way, wasn't there....."

"Eh? What?"

"......No, nothing."

She couldn't think of it. The voice she had heard in her dream just now, had it been.....

Suddenly, Akino's ears stood up straight and she looked in the direction they had come from.

...A pentagram of light was drawn in the sky there.

The Yamantaka method.

"W-Why did that magic seal appear!? Is it the Exorcist Bureau?"

"I-Isn't that the place we came from....."

Natsume's expression changed.

...Harutora-kun.....!

"As I thought, we should go back!" This time it was Akino pulling Natsume to urge her on.

"......No. We can't go back right now."

That was definite. Since Harutora decided it, all I can do is trust Harutora.

...He would definitely be alright.

Suddenly, a motorcycle stopped about ten meters ahead of them.

"As I thought."

The man on the vehicle spoke in surprise.

"Is it..... Natsume?"

"Kogure!?"

Natsume's body stiffened.

His current pallid expression was scarier than the Kogure she had seen a long time ago. But the eyes looking their way were the same as always.

...Not good!

Kogure currently belonged to the Mystical Investigators, and Natsume was being chased by the Mystical Investigators.

It wouldn't be strange for him to strike out with Unmoving Golden Chains right now. Should she run? But Kogure was riding a motorcycle and had the four crow tengu shikigami. She couldn't escape over any terrain.

But unexpectedly - Kogure didn't move.

A stalemate.

Dozens of seconds felt as long as several hours.

What broke this silence wasn't Natsume, Akino, or Kogure.

"Water, obscure! Order!"

The three of them were surrounded by a sudden fog.

The voice chanting the incantation just now was very familiar.

A large vehicle appeared on the fog-covered road alongside loud engine noise.

A Hummer plated heavily like an armored car. The brown-haired girl leaning out the window cut through the fog.

"Hakuou! Kokfuu!"

"Kyouko!"

Natsume cried out. Right as the words left her mouth, the knight-shaped 'Type M2 Yaksha', Kyouko's defensive shikigami Hakuou, was summoned behind her.

Just as Kogure was about to turn around, the other Yaksha Kokfuu blocked his way with spear in hand.

"Kyouko!"

Leaning her body out, Kyouko looked back over at Natsume and put on a shaky smile.

"Yeah, Natsume! Are you alright?"

Leaving Kogure behind, the Hummer drove through the night, departing at full speed over the road.

★

The black Yaksha also dematerialized after the Hummer left.

Should he pursue? With the crow tengus' speed, even a Hummer was catchable.

But Kogure didn't give any orders to pursue.

"......Natsume-kun."

Of course, he knew that Natsume had been resurrected with the Taizan Fukun Ritual, but having someone who had died before standing before him was still an unimaginable shock.

As he thought, a large van pulled up next to him and a voice shouting for him came from the driver's seat. It was Kogure's current teammate, Yamashiro of the Twelve Divine Generals.

"What are you spacing out about!? Officer Miyachi's magic activated a long time ago!"

Ten minutes before, Kogure's team had received the report of Tsuchimikado's capture. Needless to say, Natsume wasn't the Tsuchimikado they were baiting out. Their true target was Tsuchimikado Harutora.

Right now, Harutora was bound in Director Miyachi's long-range magic. This was an incredible opportunity to arrest him.

But,

"......Miyoshi."

Kogure called out to his teammate in the backseat of the van, the Special Sensor with the nickname 'Heaven's Eye' - Miyoshi Tougo.

"What?"

"Can you understand the situation on scene from here?"

"Well, it's certainly not easy to 'see' with Officer Miyachi's magic - but judging by what it looked like a moment ago, it's undoubtedly Tsuchimikado Harutora, Hishamaru, and Kakugyouki who were captured. The aura is the same from that time at Seishuku Temple."

...Natsume-kun had been here just now rather than at the scene.....

It was very difficult for the Yamantaka method of General Onmyoudou to hit a moving target. If Harutora had been searching for Natsume, he would definitely have been constantly moving, and couldn't have gotten hit so easily. They had needed Natsume as bait for this..... But in that case, why was Natsume here.....?

"......Miyoshi, are there Mystical Investigators on the scene?"

"......None nearby."

"But there were people there, right? The people fighting with Tsuchimikado Harutora."

"That's wrong."

"Hah?"

"They weren't human, they were shikigami. I can't spot the aura of a master. Incidentally, they also fought with Tsuchimikado Natsume before Tsuchimikado Harutora arrived."

"Wait." Yamashiro was confused. "You mean Tsuchimikado Natsume's also there?"

"No. After the fight, her presence vanished..... Probably left with some other shikigami."

Miyoshi stared at Kogure as he said this instead of looking at Yamashiro who had asked the question.

"......Are they Mystical Investigator shikigami?"

"Who knows....."

Kogure thought rapidly.

They had been able to stop Harutora, Hishamaru, and Kakugyouki, and had successfully led them into Miyachi's magic. In other words, they were shikigami serving the Exorcist Bureau or Onmyou Agency.

He knew a number of shikigami that could satisfy the first condition. But to simultaneously satisfy the second condition.....

Even the Divine General Kogure didn't know whether he could oppose Hishamaru or Kakugyouki. As for an Onmyou Agency shikigami.....?

Kogure and the others hadn't been called over to 'engage', but to help 'capture'. Just as a means of insurance. And for Harutora.....

"......Oh my."

Miyoshi suddenly spoke up. His voice was very flat, but when Miyoshi spoke up on his own, it meant something abnormal was happening.

"What happened?"

Kogure asked.

"A new force has appeared. It's unfortunate, but we should go back for today."

★

"Damn!?"

The bout with Yashamaru had been at most a skirmish, and he hadn't thought of a powerful magic like the Yamantaka method. It was a great magic that usually needed a number of people..... No, dozens of people to cast, and now there was only one caster. The practitioner possessed that level of strength.

"The Divine General Miyachi Iwao..... How powerful!"

Though he had heard rumors during his hiding, only now that he was experiencing this superhuman spiritual power first-hand did he recognize that they hadn't been lies or exaggerations.

He could only maintain the barrier resisting the Yamantaka method because he had Kakugyouki with him converting spiritual power into magical energy to maintain it.

But that Kakugyouki was showing a fatigued expression.

".....Hey, this is bad."

"I know that!"

They might be able to escape if Kakugyouki got serious. It wouldn't be hard for the ancient oni with one of the three strongest spiritual powers in Japanese history to oppose the 'Fire Demon' controlling this at a range. If he broke through the barrier with all his power and whipped up a storm of spiritual power, Harutora could escape with magic.

But.....

"H-Harutora-sama! Please don't mind me!"

Hishamaru was down on the overpass gasping on one knee next to Harutora. With her unstable spiritual power and after having suffered the Yamantaka method attack, the current Hishamaru would be unable to safely avoid an explosive storm. But if this deadlock went on, they would eventually be worn down.

He could take off the Raven's Wing and give it to Hishamaru, but the Raven's Wing was Harutora's shikigami in the end, so it wouldn't be a very effective defense for the fellow shikigami Hishamaru.

Damn. Harutora regretted.

Had calling Hishamaru back been a mistake?

Thinking about it now was useless. The important thing now was to think of how to break through this quandary.

But,

...How would he break through it?

No matter how he thought, he couldn't find any ways to break through. Also, during the short period of time that Harutora was inactive, Kumomaru had taken new action.

He had circled around both ends of the overpass, setting three charms on each side to surround Harutora and company. Able to guess Yashamaru and Kumomaru's trick, Harutora inadvertently gulped.

"The Eight-Point Barrier! Damn, they're really doing it....."

The next moment, the six charms linked with Yashamaru and Kumomaru by pale blue lines of magical energy. The Eight-Point Barrier, a technique used against spiritual disasters. The spell originally required eight people to cast, but the other six were being replaced by charms. It was weaker than the true barrier, but was strong enough not to be easily broken through from the inside.

".....Harutora!"

"I know!"

If the barrier were completed, they would be doomed, trapped inside the barrier even if Kakugyouki broke through the Yamantaka method. Even if they stalled for time, it would just invite more Independent Officers. What could they do--

"...Order!"

A charm that flew over from somewhere cut apart the spreading lines of magic, wrecking the almost-formed Eight-Point Barrier. Yashamaru and Kumomaru who had been focusing on the spell moved back in a panic.

Three figures appeared below.

A seductive woman, a short, fat man, and a figure with a cane.

"Ohtomo-sensei....."

".....Yeah. I'm finally able to see you, Harutora-kun."

★

"Natsume..... This is great, you finally....." Natsume's eyes also moistened when she saw Kyouko breaking down into tears.

"Welcome back!"

.Ah, that's right.

Kyouko hadn't met the resurrected Natsume. The Natsume in her memories had been stick in time since the moment she died.

What pushed that time into progressing again was the Natsume sitting before here who Akino had brought back.

"Sorry, I never contacted anyone, I....."

"Honestly. We finally managed to meet, but you're talking about such stupid things. ...Right, Tenma?"

"Yeah. That's right. It's not like you, Natsume."

"Tenma-kun!"

As she thought, it was Momoe Tenma. The person Akino had sent the letter to before. He also remembered Akino, and greeted her.

"Thanks for before. You really surprised me that time."

"Ah, no, that wasn't, u-um!"

"Do you know Tenma?"

"Eh? Ah, yes, well, um,"

"I got a love letter from her."

"Love letter?'

"N-No!"

The wide-eyed Kyouko and the red-faced Akino. Kyouko, who had been almost crying before, now couldn't help but laugh.

"Hmm? Are you embarrassed? There's nothing to hide~ Okay, let's stop joking around. It's good that Natsume's safe."

"....."

Speaking of which, Kyouko was a daughter of a famous family - as well as the daughter of the Onmyou Agency Chief - but she had gone to such lengths for Natsume.

...This person was a good person. What a sympathetic, broad-minded good person.

"Okay, we'll talk about the details later. .....So, how did the two of you find us? Do you know about Harutora-kun?"

"Harutora!? Harutora's here?"

She asked in surprise. It looked like Kyouko didn't know what had happened to Harutora. Natsume scratched her head and explained what had unfolded.

Though they had gone through a lot, she, Akino, and the rest still weren't safe. Harutora was being imprisoned in that magic. Kyouko bit her lip in regret.

"Anyways, now we have to escape the pursuit of the Mystical Investigators. Also..... where are we going to run too?"

"I think we should go to the city center first..... probably."

"Probably? What do you mean?'

"Well, actually....."

"Master, a report."

Suddenly, a voice she hadn't heard before came through the speakers. It wasn't the voice of a human.

"I-Is this car a mechanical-type shikigami?"

"Hama," Tenma asked the dashboard without letting Natsume finish:

"What's going on?"

"E1 is gradually approaching. It looks locked on to us."

"'Garuda'! The shikigami of Independent Officer Shigeoka! ...Hama, can you shake it off?"

"Sorry, Master, it's flying faster than our current maximum speed. It's impossible to shake off. I surmise that we might be able to lose it if we go underground of into a building. Should I try?"

"No, Tenma! We'll just back ourselves into a corner if we do that!"

"I know. Let's just see how things go for now and think of something--"

"Report! Garuda is descending at high speed! Commencing evasive maneuvers, prepare yourselves!"

Tenma was underestimating the opponent.

"H-Hama!?"

"Garuda approaching from behind. Estimated distance fifty meters."

They quickly looked back. A giant black figure was close by and heading straight for them at an incredibly low altitude.

"......Get ready to fight! Open the roof!"

"N-Natsume, really!?"

"Hama, open the roof!"

"Understood. Shifting to opened mode."

The parts inside the car shifted and the roof was completely pulled into the seats. The cold wind raged by and the vast night sky was above their heads.

"Garuda is approaching. We'll be in contact with the enemy soon. Three... Two... It's passing above!"

Overlapping with Hama's report, Garuda passed over the heads of Akino and company at high speed, catching up to the car and turning in front of them.

But when Akino hastily turned her head to look in front of them, it was already dozens of meters away.

"Ah, huh?"

The Garuda that seemed to have been attacking them had passed over their heads. It just kept going forwards, then scattered a number of pieces of paper.

The papers 'took form' one after another--

"Garuda has scattered shikigami charms. The shikigami have been formed. Four - seven - eleven - twelve shikigami in total have been confirmed. Six are 'Type G1 Emperors' and six are 'Type G2 Yaksha', all custom models. They are arranged in an offensive configuration. ...Master, your orders."

Chapter 5

"Independent Officer, preparations are complete."

Shigeoka silently raised his right hand and waited for a short while upon receiving his subordinate's report. After all, the current Exorcist Bureau Shinjuku Branch was being swept up in a powerful magical energy. Miyachi was using the Yamantaka method on another room's roof. Shigeoka moved his consciousness towards the Garuda again, suitably grouping the produced shikigami.

His target was the initial-version Hama H1. It was a widely-available four-wheeled all-purpose vehicle made for the American army. But Hama might be a mechanical-type shikigami. Would the Tsuchimikado family have prepared a shikigami? It would be extremely troublesome if it were a mechanical-type shikigami. He just had a deep interest in that possibility.

For now, Shigeoka surrounded the Hama, guiding the flow of events. He instructed the group of shikigami to stop the car if possible. Information obtained from the Garuda arrived continuously. Shigeoka stood up from his chair, giving an order to the subordinate on standby and walking out to the corridor. An image of the scene was being transmitted directly to him.

"Has traffic been restricted?"

"The metropolitan police ordered so, but it's impossible for traffic to improve immediately."

"No helping it. Even though we predicted this course of events, have the shikigami go first and forcefully stop traffic."

"Eh~ But....."

"The target is an underage individual. Respond according to the spiritual disaster situation."

"Understood. I'll make arrangements immediately. Hey~"

The subordinate making the report signaled with his eyes, and several people quickly left the area. Shigeoka walked forward, leisurely moving through the corridor.

Shigeoka had simultaneously deployed 'Modified Emperors' and 'Modified Yaksha', shikigami with high-speed maneuvering. It was very likely that they could match Hama. They couldn't rush capturing the target.

"But as I thought, I can't accept it."

"Eh? What is it?"

Shigeoka replied "nothing" without changing his expression.

What Shigeoka said he couldn't accept was the instructions he had received from Onmyou Agency Chief and Exorcist Bureau Chief Kurahashi. The only thing keeping Shigeoka in this matter was his occupational duty. First off, ordering a search for the fleeing Tsuchimikado Natsume was already pushing it for his exorcist self. Of course, if there were special circumstances, he could accept using the Garuda's multifunctionality alongside a search mission. If it were a rational order, it would perfectly fit the rule-constrained, inflexible Shigeoka.

That didn't just apply to a search. Even a standby mission of an arrest would be another matter. Shigeoka might be willing to use his group of shikigami if Kurahashi's arrest of Natsume were as dangerous as a

spiritual disaster purification. In any case, ignoring any requests of the various organizations, it had been designated as being the same level as a spiritual disaster purification even if it brought harm to the surroundings.

Tsuchimikado was the main family of the Kurahashi. Unexpectedly, there were some problems between the two families. After all, the two families were both renowned, and it wouldn't be strange if they knew one or two bad things about the other.

But there were other areas he couldn't agree with. Shigeoka also knew that the report that had been spread earlier was to lure out Tsuchimikado Harutora. Then in that case, shouldn't it have been Shigeoka's fighting strength being matched against Harutora earlier? Of course, Shigeoka's group of shikigami did have its weaknesses outside of the spiritual disaster purification it was best suited to. Though he couldn't deny that he might not be such a good match with other prominent Onmyouji, fighting strength was fighting strength. What should have been chosen? Harutora, instead of Natsume. Though Miyachi, the Exorcist Bureau's greatest fighting strength at the moment, was far away, he was putting everything into the fight.

Shigeoka closed his eyes and shook his head, saying:

"No, what a fruitless investigation."

He was just an exorcist. The mission this time was very special, but his position hadn't changed. He ought to diligently pursue the mission he had been assigned. Since he was the Onmyouji Shigeoka Shunsuke. Two minutes later, Shigeoka was sitting in a spiritual disaster purification team's transport vehicle heading to the Shinjuku branch. If he left two minutes late, the situation afterwards might have become extremely chaotic.

"Master, your orders."

When Hama asked for instructions, Natsume stood up from her seat and threw charms. But there were a total of twelve Emperors and Yaksha among the shikigami summoned in front of them; their numbers were far too great. Perhaps that group of shikigami were the 'Colonel's special type. She had ultimately been unable to see his shikigami in action during the spiritual disaster purification a few days ago due to being short on time. Their capabilities were unknown.

The cars behind them braked one after another upon noticing the group of shikigami in front of them. Only Hama still moved forward.

Natsume's charm-holding fingers trembled as she failed to think of any suitable strategies.

Tenma was the one to make a decision first.

"Hama, increase your barrier strength to maximum and break through."

"Understood."

Hama immediately complied with Tenma's command. An explosion-like sound of exhaust roared out and the barrier was strengthened. Kyouko shouted from the passenger's seat, her body going stiff.

"Hold on, Tenma."

"It's alright. Probably."

"Probably!?"

Natsume sat back on the seat in a panic. Shocked, Akino covered her head as if to brace herself. Immediately afterwards, Hama crashed into two of the Emperors at the forefront of the shikigami in front of them.

The 'G1 Emperor' was the bulkiest defensive shikigami that the Onmyou Agency manufactured. The two Emperors in front of them were large. Natsume gritted her teeth. The Emperors and Hama's barrier made contact in an intense collision. But Hama still advanced. The four-wheel-drive tires spun on the asphalt road, a bit stuck. The powerful horsepower drove the car forward when the Emperors and the barrier hit each other. The two emperors were sent flying, unable to stand the overwhelming force.

Forcefully breaking through the two Emperors, Hama accelerated in a flash. Next it collided with the Yaksha behind it. The 'G2 Yaksha' were lighter-weight defensive shikigami than the Emperors. Unable to stop Hama's advance, they were knocked flying in an instant.

But mechanical-type shikigami, composed of physical materials rather than spirit, only had an advantage of physical strength. They had no advantages other than pure destructive and defensive power when compared to other kinds of shikigami. The Armored Juggernaut military-use shikigami was a typical example.

Hama's had extremely high abilities to supplement these mechanical-type shikigami features. Though its vehicular capabilities were very high, it was also extremely outstanding as a shikigami.

"A high-level manmade shikigami? But where exactly did this shikigami come from?"

Hama accurately operated the vehicle during Natsume's surprise. Akino wailed. Tenma gritted his teeth and gripped the controls. Kyouko's body was still and she was extremely surprised.

The giant Hama's advance was difficult to deal with, and the shikigami group's enclosure began to show gaps. The Emperors approached from the side in order to immediately fill them. But Hama avoided them, then hit the Yaksha in front of them one after another, knocking them back and forcefully opening a hole.

"We broke through!" Tenma cheered.

The wind that was whipped up blew Natsume's black hair into a mess. Natsume tossed her hair back in the roaring wind and confirmed the positions of the group of shikigami. After they had broken through the group of shikigami, the shikigami had reformed their positions and regrouped. Normally, Emperors and Yaksha had different movements, especially as special models.

"Tenma-kun, they're coming again."

"Hama, can you break through this time?"

"Absolutely."

Hama's engine roared out again and it started accelerating once more. It even ignored red lights during this. Hama was the only one on the road. They couldn't see any signs of cars in front of them either.

"Great. If that's all....."

"Uh oh, they're coming."

The moment Tenma shouted out, Natsume issued a warning.

The Yaksha coming from behind overtook them. Akino screamed again at the defensive shikigami cutting across the night sky. But the Yaksha were stopped by the barrier again and dropped down to the ground. The Emperors chasing from behind immediately picked them back up. Hama forced its way past two of them and Akino screamed again. The barrier stopped their attacks, but the Yaksha continued attacking. The Yaksha

that had been helped back up recovered and sprinted next to Hama alongside the one other remaining Yaksha. They formed a semicircular enclosure behind Hama. Behind the Yaksha were the Emperors that continued to support them. But the Yaksha's attacks still couldn't break through the barrier. It looked like the barrier Hama put up was very powerful.

But if this went on.....

Twelve shikigami supporting each other, with somewhat of a different atmosphere from the ones Yashamaru controlled. They were more like a pack of hunting beasts than a single organism. To put it further, they were a trained team. It was extremely draining to put up with this kind of repetitive attack.

"Sorry, Master. It will be very difficult to maintain the current barrier strength for a minute. May I lower the barrier's strength?"

"No!! If you lower the strength now, the vehicle body will be instantly destroyed."

"It will be very difficult to escape attack range during that time. Forty-nine second left."

Hama's calm voice and Tenma's panic made Natsume resolve herself again.

"Let me deal with them. Can you adjust the barrier to let me fight back from the inside?"

"E-Eh....."

"Though I can't change the barrier's characteristics, I can change its shape."

"Then do that. Kyouko, please have Hakuou and Kokfuu defend on both sides.

"Got it. Tenma."

"I guess we have no choice, let's do it. Three, two, one, change the barrier shape!"

"Understood, changing the barrier's shape!!!!!"

With that, the barrier covering the vehicle body sagged in front the top and moved to the sides, becoming a ring-shaped defensive wall. Kyouko summoned her defensive shikigami Hakuou and Kokfuu. The two of them slashed from the center of the vehicle body with sword and spear. Observing that part of the barrier had opened, half of the Yaksha continued the attack while the remaining attack leaped up again. But Hakuou and Kokfuu swung their sword and spear, keeping the enemies from approaching from the air.

Natsume also jumped up from her seat, throwing a charm and shouting "Order!".

The water-element charm formed a cannon of water and hit the jumping Yaksha directly. Though it didn't do much harm, it made the Yaksha fall down. Natsume threw out an earth-element charm next. Sharp metal shot out like shotgun pellets, but they were deflected by the Yaksha that hadn't leaped up. These Yaksha charged forward, forming club-like weapons and pressing in on Natsume. The Yaksha confronting Hakuou and Kokfuu took similar actions. The shikigami were unable to attack them directly due to the defensive barrier, but the Yaksha's club attacks shook the barrier. Just then, the first three Yaksha jumped up again.

"Ah..... Tenma, let's help too."

"Okay. Hama, I'll leave the steering to you."

Kyouko and Tenma stood up from the passenger and driver seats.

"Akino, trade with me." Kyouko and Akino traded spots, and she and Tenma moved to the backseat.

Natsume threw down charms again, and this time Hama started to speed up. The six Yaksha also formed a group to pursue, with the six Emperors behind them.

Hakuou and Kokfuu slashed out wantonly with their sharp blades. The three people in the backseat threw charms. The actions of the group of shikigami were very monotonous, to be honest. But their coordination was certainly flawless. They didn't give a moment of respite. The six Emperors behind them were in standby for now, but they also presented a threat. The enemy wanted to capture them using as few troops as possible.

But the battling defensive shikigami were also defensive shikigami controlled by an Independent Exorcist. They could be destroyed one by one. But Natsume's magical power still hadn't recovered completely. Defeating twelve defensive shikigami would be quite dangerous.

"Natsume, in front of you!"

Behind her, Akino cried out in a panic: "Garuda!!!"

The Garuda that had left the battle suddenly descended from the sky above. Could it have some means of attacking directly!? With the current barrier shape, Hama was completely unguarded from above. Kyouko, also conscious of this fact, shouted Natsume's name. But once the Garuda appeared, the Yaksha's actions became more numerous. Though they were simple mechanical movements, each movement had its own individual meaning.

"Oh no!!"

Hama began evading, but its range of movement was restricted by to the obstructing Yaksha to the left and right. They had lost. He thought so. A pale blue light flashed from the eastern sky like a laser.

A direct hit!!

The Garuda's outer form was distorted and its path deviated greatly. This was a fire-element charm technique. At the same time, a group of shikigami flew out and engulfed the off-balance Garuda. White-colored shikigami - paper shikigami.

"Natsume!!!"

A nostalgic voice came from the sky.

"Suzuka!!!"

The world seemed to warm up when their eyes met.

Suddenly, Hama braked. Since its body's inertia constantly carried it forward, Hama didn't stop immediately. The moment it felt that it was going to crash, a young man full of demonic aura dropped from the sky onto the hood.

"Hey hey, what did you guys get your hands on, isn't this the mechanical shikigami Hama!?"

"Touji!!"

Touji stopped the Emperors head-on with all his strength. He shouted loudly as the armor covering his body disappeared. The Emperor in front staggered, and the momentums of the two Emperors behind it were reduced, with their actions becoming confused as well.

"Go!"

Hama immediately followed Touji's command. It knocked aside the remaining two Emperors. Kyouko and Tenma were extremely moved by Suzuka's and Touji's debuts as well. Suzuka called their names, while Touji smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Is the 'Colonel' our alliance's next opponent? Arriving at such a high level all of a sudden is like that time with Ashiya Doman, isn't it?" Touji's words emboldened Natsume, Kyouko, and Tenma.

As Touji said, their memories from when Ashiya Doman had attacked the Onmyou Academy were awakened again. Natsume and the others had also fought with countless shikigami back then. The situation had been more desperate than this one.

Harutora, Ohtomo, and the principal weren't here.

But now she was different from back then. She possessed enough fighting strength.

"Natsume, can you give orders?"

"Alright."

Natsume replied to Touji immediately, becoming enlivened.

"We'll break through here. Please lend me your strength, everyone."

Touji, Kyouko, Tenma, and Suzuka all responded with all their might to Natsume's order. The panicked Akino looked at Natsume and the friends around her. The sound of Hama's engine became louder. It roared like a battle cry through the nighttime road.

The Exorcist Bureau Shinjuku Branch. The Twin-Horned Syndicate members had entrenched themselves in a building of this branch during the Twin-Horned Syndicate sweep operation two year ago. Two years later, a mobile altar burning with red flame was set up on the building's roof.

Independent Exorcist Miyachi Iwao sat wearing a cassock[7] in front of the flame, focusing on chanting an incantation. "On kirikushuchiribikiri tadanouun sarabashatorodashaya satanbayasatanbaya sohatasohatasowaka..." He repeated the chant in a certain rhythm, whose unique cadence could fascinate the listener. A team of exorcists were around Miyachi with the same mindset as their boss. The Onmyouji centered on Miyachi changed the aura of this area, making it slowly expand.

Miyachi's strong spiritual power had been formed by training with the Yamantaka method magic. His honed spiritual power flowed into the flame of the altar, and the spell swallowed it and floated it to the eastern sky. This was the Fire Demon's Yamantaka method.

"On kirikushuchiribikiri tadanouun sarabashatorodashaya satanbayasatanbaya sohatasohatasowaka... Onshuchiri kyararoha unkensowaka..."

The kindling burned and scattered sparks, its flame illuminating the night sky. Miyachi released his hand seal and picked up some of the stacked-up kindling, adding it to the flame. This series of movements was all unconscious.

"On kirikushuchiribikiri tadanouun sarabashatorodashaya satanbayasatanbaya sohatasohatasowaka... Onshuchiri kyararoha unkensowaka..."

Receiving Miyachi's magical energy, the altar scattered sparks. The jumping flame was already three meters high, seeming to show some kind of pride. Miyachi continued chanting the incantation, changing the rhythm of the incantation slightly. Then, Miyachi's lips curled into a bitter smile.

"Hello!"

A young voice came from the rooftop. A different demon had entered.

"It's been a while, Onmyouji Miyachi Iwao. We haven't met like this since the summer of two years ago, haven't we."

A boy stood on the other side of the flame. This boy was about ten years old and wore an old-fashioned outfit and blood-colored sunglasses. He was probably different from an ordinary person, to give off such an abnormal aura at such a young age.

"On kirikushuchiribikiri tadanouun sarabashatorodashaya satanbayasatanbaya sohatasohatasowaka... Onshuchiri kyararoha unkensowaka..."

Miyachi stopped the chant and sighed, standing up expressionlessly.

"It has been a long time, Priest."

"Yeah, sorry to bother with this sudden visit."

The two of them met each other's gazes. The boy - Ashiya Doman - shrugged his shoulders.

"You should know the situation, and you probably knew I would be coming."

"I'm extremely sorry, but I was constantly hoping you wouldn't come."

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[7] A Buddhist monk's robe.

"Hmph, that only results in the opposite effect."

"Well, then it was certainly a failure. Priest, did you come alone?"

"Yes, it's always been that way recently."

"How frightening. I wonder how great of a catastrophe it will take before 'he' realizes."

"Well then, I had best prepare myself."

"Abandoning yourself and preparedness are not the same."

"Hmph, don't be too arrogant. Will you really manage?"

"....."

Miyachi didn't reply. Doman chuckled and the conversation ended there.

The pentagram mark that had appeared in the night sky suddenly became weak and lost its shine.

Ohtomo let out a hostile laugh. As they had planned beforehand, Doman had interfered with Miyachi's long-range magic. A fight between trump cards was currently taking place there. The other Divine Generals, especially the Independent Exorcists, were supporting Miyachi.

Since he had escaped the Yamantaka method's direct attack, Harutora released his barrier and sighed with Hishamaru by his side. Though Ohtomo had been a step late to the Dark Temple, this time he had made it in time to help his student.

"Student, huh."

The Harutora who stood there felt different from a certain student in Ohtomo's memories in ways other than outer appearance. For example, Harutora's aura and his style were different compared to before.

The way a practitioner interpreted universal nature and freely controlled yin and yang consisted of his style as an Onmyouji. The one Ohtomo saw now was the reincarnation of the legendary Onmyouji Tsuchimikado Yakou - the great Onmyouji who had revived magic - rather than his former student. The best evidence for that were the two shikigami by his side - Hishamaru and Kakugyouki, known as Yakou's two guardians. But to Ohtomo, it wasn't Harutora's strength that was important.

"Oh, Kakugyouki, it's been a long time."

The woman next to Ohtomo suddenly shouted out loudly. She was a very tall, very powerful woman. But her wording was a bit childish. At the same time, the short, fat man behind Ohtomo also waved slightly. These two were the shikigami Mezu and Gozu who served Doman. Mezu waved at Kakugyouki behind Harutora. Kakugyouki had been in contact with Doman for a long time, so he knew these two. Kakugyouki looked in the distance and said:

"It's you guys? Isn't Doman the one who stopped the magic?"

"That's right."

"This is pretty nice. Lend me a hand, Brother Ibaraki" Gozu said after Mezu.

At the same time, Ohtomo and Harutora were staring blankly at each other. Both of them wore wry smiles.

"Harutora-kun, is it? You won't give your name this time?"

"Yeah, that's me." Harutora laughed and said:

"Sensei, you're always helping me out."

That laugh was different from that of the Harutora from before. Even so, this was Harutora's smile. Ohtomo clearly sensed that this was the Harutora he recognized. It was also very fitting for Ohtomo. The accumulated doubt in his chest were finally released, and a sense of mission and responsibility welled up instead. Even now, Harutora was his student.

Harutora's actions of hiding his whereabouts were a mystery. But since he had already confirmed that he was Harutora, he had already decided what he ought to do. Ohtomo finally glanced at the two young shikigami. He had recollections of both of them. Though they weren't very clear, his mind still held remnants of memories.

"Are you the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division's Mutobe Chihiro, and the Chief of the Lingering Spirit Division, 'Professor' Dairenji Shidou?"

After Ohtomo checked, the monocled young man laughed coldly.

"Nice to meet you, 'Shadow' Ohtomo Jin. Or should I call you 'Three-leg' or 'White Yatagarasu'? It's just as you say. But now, he's Kumomaru and I'm Yashamaru."

"Yase Doji serving the Souma line, huh?"

"Hmph, did you ask Ashiya Doman? He's a troublesome person too."

Mezu glared angrily at Yashamaru as he engaged in a verbal joust with Ohtomo.

"What's your deal!? I can't forgive you for speaking Doman-sama's name directly and insulting him!"

"Hmph, you're just a dog raised by the Souma."

Doman's two faithful defensive shikigami immediately showed their hostility, but Yashamaru smiled coldly and said:

"You're just an Ox-Head and Horse-Face.[8]"

Yashamaru continued his taunting and looked back at Ohtomo. Ohtomo didn't react. Both of them had been prominent Onmyouji before death. Now they had become Yase Doji and possessed both the abilities of practitioners and the power of shikigami.

"Harutora-kun, though I have a lot of things to ask you, I'll talk with you later. There are a couple troublesome things here, so leave them to me." He spoke with the same calm tone, but his head rapidly spun around.

"I have a lot of things I want to ask about the Souma. Like the Spiritual Disaster Early Detection Sensory Net and the stupid altar."

Yashamaru's eyes twitched and showed a cold light when he heard Ohtomo say this. Kumomaru's expression also tensed up behind him.

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[8] Referencing the guardians of the underworld that Gozu and Mezu are based off of.

"Was that Ashiya Doman as well.....? It looks like the pairing of you and the Priest exceeded our imaginations. No, it seems that you've exceeded them by a troublesome amount."

Ohtomo's expression didn't change when he heard Yashamaru say this. It seemed that the speculation that Doman had made to Ohtomo before had hit the mark. Perhaps Kogure, who was the Onmyou Agency's match for Ohtomo, would be heading here, but there was no time. Still, it would be almost impossible to meet the Souma again. They were taking a dangerous risk, which to Ohtomo was a critical juncture for victory.

"...Ah, Chief!?"

Suddenly, Kumomaru who had been silent the entire time crashed into Yashamaru from behind. He grabbed Yashamaru's body and leaped out to the edge of the overpass as if to tumble down. At almost the same time, Hishamaru, who had silently approached with simple shikigami, released her stealth and attacked from behind. Though they avoided her first strike, she still chased after the enemy. Kumomaru dodged Hishamaru's attack in midair. Yashamaru was forming a seal behind him. But Kakugyouki, who had silently flown above them, expressionlessly commenced an attack, and Yashamaru quickly defended himself with a barrier. Hishamaru and Kakugyouki cooperated to attack the two Yase Doji. Suddenly, there were four defensive shikigami fighting above the river.

"What!?"

Ohtomo was stunned. The sneak attack had completely taken him by surprise.

"Hold on, Boss."

Mezu stamped her feet in displeasure, and Mezu was also clearly very upset. Ohtomo immediately moved to tell them to join in the fight. But.....

"Please don't move."

Harutora alone spoke from the overpass. It was a slightly tense voice, and seemed to restrain Ohtomo.

The four shikigami collided with each other, bounced back, and moved apart. It had just been Yashamaru and Kumomaru on the edge of the overpass, and now it was Hishamaru and Kakugyouki. The two Yase Doji moved cautiously moved in the opposite direction from the river. Ohtomo also checked the battle situation. Both sides hadn't gone all-out, but it was obvious that Ohtomo ought to help out if they didn't want to stall for time.

"Harutora-kun?"

Ohtomo wanted to ask what Harutora's reasons for stopping him were. Although his heart told him there was no need to ask, he said it anyway. But Harutora's reply was completely opposite from what Ohtomo anticipated.

"Ohtomo-sensei, though I want you to help us, I can't rely on you. I'm extremely sorry, but to be honest, I can't trust you right now."

"What are you saying, Harutora-kun. How could I....." Ohtomo was extremely surprised.

"Sensei, you're currently destroying the balance of yin and yang." Harutora calmly replied.

"Sensei, you've started relying on Ashiya Doman's shikigami since last summer. That's quite a terrible thing."

"I know that....."

"No, that's wrong. Although you're self-aware, I can only judge it to be completely insufficient."

"Is that what you have to say after seeing my actions?"

Harutora didn't reply immediately. He sighed deeply and said:

"Disturbance of yin and yang isn't only a problem of aura. The mind and soul also have effects. Have you not considered it? Sensei, when Doman attacked the academy building, you were courteous until the very end. And now? You're driven by impulse without knowing it. That's right, like an ara-mitama."

"....."

"Ara-mitama aren't things that can be dealt with so easily. Your methods are no good. That's why they are ara-mitama. Sensei, you probably could have noticed it before, but your current self cannot."

Harutora smirked. His voice gave away what he thought about Ohtomo.

"I can feel your sense of responsibility and your gentleness, although those are what blinded you. But you're too dangerous right now, Sensei."

With his former pupil now lecturing him, Ohtomo stood there dumbly, unable to say anything back.

"Hah? What's up with that guy. I don't get what he's saying at all." Mezu raised an eyebrow and muttered.

Harutora continued:

"Of course it's very dangerous. Though it's irresponsible of me to say this, I now finally understand the final warning that Kogure made back then. That person's mostly in the right. I think that Kogure is chasing after you for the same reason, Sensei."

Harutora shut his mouth after saying this.

Hishamaru, Kakugyouki, Yashamaru, and Kumomaru confronted each other on the two sides of the river. A tense atmosphere filled area.

Ohtomo had told himself in his heart to focus his mind on the current battle, so he had cast away his personal emotions from before.

With the shikigami against the Yase Doji, they could take their time and pay attention to crucial matters. But if Harutora impeded Ohtomo's actions, Ohtomo would be powerless for a while. During that time, the Yase Doji could find some way to escape. Harutora's side and the Yase Doji had thought of the same thing.

Yashamaru continued confronting Hishamaru and Kakugyouki while listening to Harutora's and Ohtomo's conversation.

Ohtomo didn't move. Harutora and Yashamaru also didn't take any actions, as if the three parties were in a Mexican standoff. But keeping this situation as it was only benefitted Yashamaru and Kumomaru.

"Then..... Noumaku saraba tatagyateibyaku saraba bokkeibyaku sarabata tarata senda makarosyada ken gyakigyaki saraba biginnan untarata kanman!"

Ohtomo recited the Fire Realm incantation without making a hand seal, preparing to form the spell. He snapped to order Gozu and Mezu into battle. Ohtomo knew that a burst of power was the best way to resolve everything.

"On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

"Kumomaru....."

"Yes."

Seeing Ohtomo's actions, Yashamaru issued orders to Kumomaru. Kumomaru rapidly formed a seal and began a spell. Hishamaru also started preparing a spell, while Kakugyouki smiled and Harutora gritted his teeth. Ohtomo's Fire Realm magic blazed bright.

A booming sound gradually approached them from the distance. It was a helicopter. At first, they thought it was a media helicopter, but no, it was an Exorcist Bureau emergency helicopter. Ohtomo thought that they should immediately take the aircraft down.

"Princess, why!?" Kumomaru said. Ohtomo and Harutora both stared at the aircraft, feeling very surprised. The aircraft instantly reached the sky above Ohtomo and the others. Then, a slim figure walked out from inside. It was a girl with bright red hair - Souma Takiko. Ohtomo's eyes widened as if he had been doused with cold water, but his body felt the illusion that it was being boiled. A frightening aura emanated from all over Takiko's body. An overwhelming presence of aura, a terrifying sensation, and an awe-inspiring manner like a god. Ohtomo didn't notice that he had cancelled his Fire Realm magic as he unconsciously looked towards that girl. Though he had lived in the world of magic for a long time, it was certainly his first time seeing someone like Takiko.

Takiko coldly looked down.

"No, it's too early!" Yashamaru shouted.

Takiko jumped down from the aircraft without hesitation. Like a god.

★

"Order!"

Alongside a vigorous voice and a tearing noise, the torrent of magic hit the Yaksha. Wind blew her hair into a mess.

Tenma was placing charms next to Natsume, and Kyouko was forming seals and chanting incantations across from them. Hakuou and Kokfuu dealt with the enemies to their left and right on their own, and Touji scattered the enemies in front of them. Hama was racing at full speed.

"We can do this!!"

A fighting spirit she had never felt before. Natsume and the others had been completely reinvigorated by Touji and Suzuka joining the fray. The two of them hadn't simply increased their fighting power by two people. The aura of their friends felt like it could support and encourage them just by being nearby. Her sad past and the various emotions she had endured and accumulated in her long period of hiding were all scattered by the strong wind.

But in the end, these were defensive shikigami controlled by Shigeoka. After Suzuka and Touji joined the battle, the Emperors that had been on standby the whole time also entered the battle and finally started trying

to take down Hama for real. The strength of the barrier that Hama put up had already been reduced by a half. Hama had reported that continuing to maintain the barrier would be very difficult. More importantly, the battle had already gone on so long that it wouldn't be strange for the Exorcist Bureau or the Mystical Investigators to come by as support. They had to win as soon as possible.

"As I thought, we have to wipe out the shikigami."

Only Natsume, Touji, and Suzuka were capable of destroying the defensive shikigami. They couldn't take Hakuou or Kokfuu off defense. Kyouko and Tenma were taking care of Akino and supporting everyone from behind. This was the optimal formation.

Since traffic was restricted, there were no signs of ordinary vehicles around them. Right now was the time to fight!

"Hama, slow down. Touji-kun, Suzuka-san, fight back."

Kyouko and Tenma on either side were also extremely nervous. Akino shouted Natsume's name, worried.

"It's alright."

Natsume would use her magical energy to strike the enemy with her lightning magic, and Touji and Suzuka would finish them off. Though the durability of Shigeoka's defensive shikigami was worthy of praise, the combined power of the three of them would definitely present no problem. Most importantly, defeating the shikigami one after another would destroy the enemy formation. This would be good for Kyouko, Tenma, and Hama.

"Okay, Natsume. Let's win."

Touji received Natsume's instructions and leaped up, turning in the sky and stepping off the vehicle body with a shout. Akino was dumbstruck as she watched from the passenger seat. After all, the car was currently moving at high speed.

"Eh..... W-Win?"

"Yeah, we need to clean up over there."

Natsume turned and looked up, and her body inadvertently became tense. Kyouko and Tenma couldn't believe their eyes, while Hama made an emergency brake when he saw the situation. But Touji was unconcerned as his eyes flashed and he roared "Third seal, release!!!" in midair. A dense demonic aura exploded out from Touji's body. Armor materialized and the demonic aura radiating from him formed a layer of flame that covered Touji. When he landed on the ground with a thump, the impact made the layer of flame dance. Touji tread on the asphalt road, instantly breaking through the Yaksha before him.

Bang.

With just one strike, he smashed through a Yaksha. The shikigami stopped moving entirely. He snatched the shikigami charm out of the air and it burned in the flames of demonic aura. Touji smiled and said: "One." The Yaksha also vanished completely as the shikigami charm was burned to ashes. Natsume was stunned.

Recognizing Touji's power, the Yaksha to his left and right immediately changed their attack target and simultaneously commenced an attack. Touji just took the attacks from every direction, but the moment the clubs came in contact with his demonic aura, they caught flame and dropped down. Touji eliminated two more Yaksha the same way. Then, seeing that the Yaksha were no good, two Emperors came up to engage him. Touji smiled and attacked in a flaming dance.

"Touji-kun!?"

Natsume was very shocked. She even thought that Touji had been consumed by the oni and had already become a spiritual disaster.

Just then, Suzuka said:

"It's alright, that guy can control it."

Suzuka sat on the hood of the stopped Hama. She dropped down and shouted.

Touji had released the multiple seals that had been placed on his body. Touji's seals were only for his own safety. But he made use of their structure to release them by the smallest degree. If he made one wrong step, the oni would slowly consume him. What a death-defying way of fighting. Normally, it might be a bit reckless, but right now the fact that they were fighting with a Divine General was reckless itself.

"But there's a limit to the time he can maintain that state. Natsume, come help, I'm going to fight the Garuda. If we don't take that shikigami down, Shigeoka will have free access to our information." Natsume looked up at the sky after Suzuka said this.

The Garuda circled around nearby, still unable to leave the battle site after taking Suzuka's charm magic. The paper shikigami Suzuka had summoned still continued their attack, but they were skillfully avoided.

"Oh no, Suzuka, the Garuda....." Kyouko shouted and Suzuka looked up in surprise. The Garuda that had originally been dodging Suzuka's shikigami scattered shikigami charms in midair. The unsealed Touji wasn't enough combat power for the current situation. Suzuka hastily ordered her shikigami to destroy the shikigami charms around them. But Shigeoka forcefully made the shikigami charms summon shikigami, and new Emperors and Yaksha materialized again. The number of defensive shikigami doubled in a flash.

"They just keep coming....." Touji was surrounded but continued his assault undaunted. But it was still unknown how long Touji's attack could continue for. First off, this wasn't all the shikigami charms the Garuda carried. They hadn't yet added in their fighting power due to constraints on the shikigami controller's mind. Shigeoka was just calmly driving the battle, calculating accurately and strategically.

"Uh oh, this will just be a war of attrition if it goes on. Natsume, let's consider escaping again."

"That's why I said, we have to attack the Garuda first, stupid Glasses."

"Suzuka, your shikigami haven't been able to catch up to the Garuda, right?"

"I've been trying."

A tense atmosphere hung over them. All of them were in anxious moods, but they only thought of facing the situation and not of giving up. Of course, Natsume was the same.

"Anyways, Natsume, you go support Touji. Clean up those shikigami before that guy reaches his limits."

"Suzuka, let's ride a shikigami."

"I see, we can have three people surround the Garuda."

"No, that won't work, it's not a very big shikigami."

"Suzuka, can you stop the Garuda's movements for a moment?"

"Eh, if it's just a moment....."

"Kyouko, Tenma, prepare fire charm magic for Five Elements Mutual Generation. It's going to be wood generating fire, not fire generating earth. Suzuka and I will save Touji and stop the Garuda's movements at the same time."

"Understood." Natsume replied and focused her mind on forming the seal of Indra.

"Noumaku sanmanda botanan indoraya sowaka". She chanted and strengthened her defensive shikigami's lightning. Magical energy gathered together in the blink of an eye.

"Hokuto, please lend me strength. First seal, release."

The moment the seal was released, draconic aura gathered again in Natsume's body and her aura swelled up and exploded outwards. This time Kyouko and Tenma were stunned. Natsume's friends were already with her, so she just needed to put out all her power. The water-element draconic aura generated wood aura. The dragon itself was the Tsuchimikado family's guardian beast, Hokuto. Everyone watched as the Garuda was stopped successfully. Ignoring the reactions around her, Natsume's draconic aura became greater and greater. She raised her right hand and the draconic aura poured out like a soaring dragon, shooting out towards the gathered Emperors and Yaksha.

"Suzuka!"

Suzuka moved immediately and the group of paper shikigami all rushed the Garuda together. At the same time, the raptor shikigami she had prepared joined up with the group. Suzuka loudly shouted for Touji, and Touji leaped up. The raptor shikigami commenced their attack and Kyouko and Tenma threw out fire-element charms. That instantaneous exchange resonated and bore fruitful results - a beautiful combination. That moment, Shigeoka finally saw Natsume's true target. But it was already too late.

"Thunder, fill the sky for nine days!"

Garuda dodged reflexively, but Suzuka's nearby shikigami stopped it.

Thunder roared.

Even the Garuda's high speed was to no avail. The spear of light that shot down from the sky instantly hit the Garuda. The flying bolt gave off a rumbling roar when it made contact and vanished without a trace. But that wasn't the end.

"Go."

Natsume swung her right hand, and the afterimage of a dragon flashed through the night sky with another imposing bellow. The sky and earth were connected by light as thunder rumbled and the wind raged. The lightning hit, and half of Shigeoka's defensive shikigami were instantly turned to ashes while the others were all covered with flames, reduced to appalling states. The lightning and draconic aura generated wood aura. The burning flame of the defensive shikigami's magical energy illuminated everything around them. The shadows of a group of stunned people flickered with the flames. Not long afterwards, Akino gingerly asked from the backseat:

"Is it over?"

"Yeah....."

Natsume didn't answer again. She uttered a brief "reseal". All that was left after the intense magic battle was Natsume's voice echoing through the silent environment.

"Amazing." Tenma expressed his opinion. Kyouko nodded her head. Suzuka was still looking wide-eyed at the traces left by the lightning bolt.

Touji, who had suffered the impact and fallen onto the asphalt road, smiled wryly. He was also unable to keep his energy from being drained by the resealing. Natsume took some time to investigate the surrounding aura. Though it was a bit abnormal, she couldn't find out where it was. But Hama said:

"Master, I propose we leave this place."

"Yeah, we don't know when Onmyou Agency men will come here."

"Suzuka, bring Touji back to the car."

Tenma hastily returned to the driver's seat, and Kyouko dematerialized Hakuou and Kokfuu.

Since Garuda had been destroyed, Shigeoka was also unaccounted for. Natsume looked out of the car, speaking to Akino in the passenger seat:

"Akino, it's alright." Hesitantly, Natsume spoke to Akino again. Akino was hugging her knees in the passenger seat, looking in the distance. Natsume looked in the same direction as Akino but didn't see anything, not even any strange aura.

"Akino, what's wrong?"

Not only did Akino not reply, she didn't even react. Tenma and Kyouko also noticed Akino's shocked expression. Natsume loudly called out to Akino, shaking her shoulders. Natsume noticed that the place Akino was looking had been the place where the Yamantaka method magic pattern had been drawn. She shook Akino's shoulders again, and this time Akino moved her gaze to a place even farther away.

"What is it?" Natsume sighed. Just then, Tenma, Kyouko, and Natsume's gazes all met. They smiled knowingly and looked in the distance just like Akino. That was where Harutora and the others were.

Then.....

★

When Takiko visited Kurahashi alone, he had been in contact with Yuge.

".....Understood. Don't chase. Give a detailed report later, return and stay on standby for now."

".....Are you talking about Suzuka?"

Takiko asked Kurahashi when he had hung up the phone.

Kurahashi nodded, unable to conceal it. But Takiko was affected less than Kurahashi had anticipated.

"I saw her at the time."

Takiko said preemptively. Perhaps her expression already exposed that thought.

".....Why didn't you stop her?" Kurahashi moved his eyes.

"Stopping her has no meaning in the first place. When I saw that news, I realized why Yashamaru and Kumomaru left the agency building. Then I just wanted to see Suzuka. Then I happened to notice Officer Yuge 'watching'."

Yuge didn't know Takiko. It wouldn't be good for Takiko to come in contact with Suzuka while Yuge was monitoring her. A correct judgment.

"I wanted to say something at the end at least..... But maybe this is better."

"Why?"

"Because....."

Takiko didn't explain. Perhaps Kurahashi already knew the reason.

Maybe she was thinking of the failure from two years ago. She had tried to benefit herself and others at the same time, but had ended up bringing others even greater misfortune.

She had wanted to rely on her, and had ended up being forced to leave her. Tsuchimikado Natsume had been the same. Tsuchimikado Harutora had been the same.

That was why she felt scared.

Afterwards, Takiko and Kurahashi waited for reports together in the executive office.

Thinking back, the first time the two of them had been alone together had been when she renewed the Yase Doji contracts. Her mindset was already greatly different from before, proof of her growth and accumulated experience.

But was she herself happy about those changes? Was it fortune or misfortune for her and the ones around her?

All she could say was that she bore responsibility for the future that she was leading them towards.

"......Soon."

"Eh?"

"Dairenji Suzuka, Tsuchimikado Natsume, and Tsuchimikado Harutora. You'll see them soon."

Takiko looked at Kurahashi in moderate surprise, muttering "Really.....".

Then, Kurahashi got a phone call from the Shinjuku Branch. The report said that Miyachi had already started using the Yamantaka method. That meant that Yashamaru and Kumomaru had already caught Harutora.

When he put down the receiver, Takiko stood up looking angry.

"Chief Kurahashi, I'll go there too."

He knew she would say this. Of course, the answer was 'No'. The situation was extremely precarious, and he wouldn't permit another mistake.

But unexpectedly, he couldn't say the word 'No'.

He felt like Takiko's body was surrounded by some kind of 'presence' as she stood there tensely.

A spiritual presence in a higher position than him - To Kurahashi, who had been steeped in magic his whole life, such a presence could not be disobeyed.

The princess was already prepared. Kurahashi broke out into a cold sweat when he thought of Yashamaru's words.

"I want to go there now. Can you send out a helicopter?"

"......I can, but....."

"If you can, then please do. I want to get there fast." She requested flatly.

As a result, Kurahashi agreed with bated breath. Then, he inadvertently tried asking:

"Uh..... Is that a revelation from your god?"

Takiko smiled. It was a strange smile.

"Chief Kurahashi. Our god won't tell us the future. He only gives us the strength to open the way to the future."

★

They had been chased into an impasse.

Tsuchimikado Harutora's Hishamaru and Kakugyouki, and Ohtomo Jin's Gozu and Mezu. Harutora refused to fight together, but that didn't change the severity of their current situation.

...It looked like today's gamble had truly been a failure.

Yashamaru made a somewhat self-derisive appraisal.

Natsume had just managed to run into Harutora, and Harutora had just managed to run into Ohtomo. The situation had developed completely differently from the plan. He had always known this wouldn't be easy, but now he could only press on.

But first they had to escape from this quandary.

Yashamaru racked his brains to think. He paid attention to Ohtomo's Fire Realm chant while staring at Harutora's every move. Supposing that there was an opening.....!

The probability was low. Qualified practitioners were determined by inspiration rather than suppositions. The first-rate were not bound by 'formulas'.

True practitioners and Onmyouji required intuition that surpassed 'formulas'. Intuition for treading into the theory of yin and yang was inspiration in the truest sense.

"Kumomaru."

"Yes!"

Following Yashamaru's instruction, Kumomaru started forming a spell. It still wasn't complete. Yashamaru reached out to the 'answer' inside him...

But instead of an 'answer' from the inside was Ohtomo's Fire Realm magic from the outside.

Suddenly, noticing a presence in the sky that he couldn't ignore, Yashamaru looked up and couldn't believe his eyes.

"...Princess? Why are you here!?"

The shocked Yashamaru and the stunned Kumomaru.

The helicopter stopped above their heads and the door opened.

It was their master.

Her hair was tinted with divine light as it danced in the firelight and gusting wind. Her alluring eyes looked down at the eyes of all present, throwing them into disarray.

An overwhelming spiritual presence that seemed to be able to freeze nearby souls just by standing there.

Takiko had already been 'possessed'. Strength suddenly flew into the Yase Doji. And it was still only 'halfway', still advancing to a realm farther ahead.

"Don't do it! It's still too early!"

Yashamaru shouted loudly.

But Takiko jumped down from the helicopter like a shaman dedicating her body to a god.

They unconsciously rushed towards their master. Yashamaru and Kumomaru both instinctively flew towards their master without a care for the threats of Harutora and Ohtomo behind them.

Then--

Takiko's aura exploded.

The earth's spiritual pulse shifted and the sky shook.

Yashamaru instantly reached Takiko and 'saw' the aura overflowing into the world.

Huge and indescribable. A presence that even surpassed the concept of space. Its number couldn't be described either. It was both one and thousands, surpassing the concept of 'number'. Humans couldn't accurately grasp its true form.

It appeared in the world by borrowing Takiko's 'shamanic' body.

The original, most essential magic - and at the same time, the most dangerous.

God summoning.

Takiko descended slower and slower and finally stopped in midair. Her limbs were lifeless and her eyes were closed. Only her hair and ornaments were fluttering. She looked to have fallen into a comatose state already.

Tremendous aura constantly poured into the world as if a great hole had opened in some wall.

Yashamaru jumped to the building below his master and looked at her.

His heartbeat accelerated. He was so excited that his vision spun.

But.....

This agitation calmed down rapidly. Yashamaru finally noticed the chant coming from behind his back.

It was a prayer.

He turned and looked. Kumomaru was taking a stance, keeping the enemies in check in his place. But it looked like there was no longer reason to do so.

Paling at Takiko's spiritual pressure, Ohtomo and the oni next to him were frozen in place. This spiritual might was too much of a deterrent to the shikigami.

Kakugyouki had also helped Hishamaru back to their master. Eh one-armed oni stared at Takiko with his most profound expression so far.

But Harutora single-mindedly chanted a prayer under his shikigamis' protection.

A soul-protecting prayer.

Suddenly, Takiko fell down as if her strings had been cut. Yashamaru hastily caught her.

Takiko had lost consciousness. That spiritual might had vanished, and the flow of spiritual power had also stopped.

But the spiritual power that had already flown out hadn't vanished.

"...! Not good. Hishamaru, Kakugyouki, retreat! Hurry!"

The great spiritual power that had just poured forth entered the spirit flow and even overturned spiritual layers.

The earth shook.

Then - the first spiritual disaster occurred. Then another. And the third, and the fourth.....

Yin, yang, and the five elements danced.

Yashamaru looked at that scene, but Kumomaru behind him howled, his mouth unconsciously forming a joyous smile.

His master still hadn't summoned the god, she had just 'come in contact'. What kind of strength did it have to cause such spiritual ruin with just that much?

".....Incredible."

★

Hama avoided main roads as much as possible as it moved.

The Onmyou Agency had withdrawn, and Hama had applied stealth magic to the entire vehicle body. It raced at full speed towards the contact point that Touji had told Amami without being noticed by any Mystical Investigators.

Tenma was in charge of driving, and Kyouko had returned to the passenger seat. Natsume, Akino, and Suzuka were in the backseat. Touji hung onto the railing by the back, responsible for watching their rear.

Their reunion a year and a half later. As well as a reunion they had risked their lives for. Everyone had heaps of things to say, but they were all silent right now.

One reason was that they were exhausted after the intense battle.

The other reason was--

"Ah."

Akino, who had materialized her rabbit ears, looked towards the same place as she had the previous few times. Everyone looked along with Akino.

All of them had repeated that action after the battle ended. Hama didn't know why, but he could perceive that area no matter where he moved. As expected, Harutora and the others were nearby.

"Akino?"

"S-Sorry, I still don't understand it, but even so, it feels....."

No matter how many times she called out to her, Akino replied the same way. Regardless of how uncertain she was, she kept staring at the same place.

"Master."

Hama hesitated over whether to report or not, then said with a calm voice:

"After the recent battle, I have confirmed that the 'Type AR4 Guardian' positioned nearby has had abnormal magical energy fluctuations. I'm still in contact with it. I speculate that a spiritual disaster has occurred."

"A spiritual disaster?"

"A 'Guardian'..... Isn't that a mechanical shikigami used to predict spiritual disasters?"

Suzuka gave an affirmation from the side.

Touji mostly understood the contents of their conversation from where he was in the back.

"What does abnormal magical energy mean, exactly....."

"The magical energy that the Guardian is releasing is far higher than its original threshold. I speculate that spiritual power has flowed into it from the outside, but the source is unclear."

"Flowed in from the outside? Is something like that possible?"

"In order to make timely observations, the Guardian itself has a spell that takes in magical energy from the outside. But the amount of magical energy I observed just now was more than the total magical energy the Guardian absorbed. The only possibility is that 'something else' was also absorbing magical energy."

"Hey, hey, who made this mechanical shikigami?" Suzuka asked curiously. Touji was also interested in that, so Tenma started to introduce Hama.

But when Natsume looked anxiously at Akino, everyone quieted down one by one and looked at the same place as Akino.

"......That's a spiritual disaster, isn't it....."

Suzuka hugged her knees, silently looking over with Natsume and Akino. Kyouko looked at Natsume and Akino worriedly.

The friends gathered here continued along the road on Hama.

The road in front of them was lit by artificial light, painting a mandala of interwoven light and darkness.

Natsume and the others wouldn't learn about the spiritual disaster chain reaction - the Phase Four - happening nearby until the next day.

On that night, the spiritual face of Tokyo started to change. Just like the last night of Pacific War's final phase, during the great spiritual disaster that completely disrupted the city's spiritual balance.